

## WHAT MAKES A WINNER?

Looking at the impressive array of trophies in the reception area at the Dental Healthcare Centre and Cleveland Cosmetic and Dental Implant Clinic, you might be forgiven for thinking that there's not much left for this practice to win. And it's true. In the last 18 months, Linda and Mike Heads and their team has scooped just about every award in the dental arena, having been Best UK Practice 2008 in the Dentistry Awards and, in November 2009, winning the most coveted and prestigious trophy: the Private Dentistry Practice of the Year. Everything about the practice, from the practice principal himself, to the hygienist, the interior design and the website, has been judged outstanding by panels of colleagues nationwide. And it's that package of excellence, which is still constantly being improved and updated, that so impressed the PD judges, including panel chairman David Houston.

"It was the strength in depth across all their multiple entries that really struck us," Houston explained. "Although they may not have won an individual category this year, they were consistently high performing across the board – they had something of merit in every category they entered and were always in the mix, finishing up shortlisted or runners-up in so many areas." Houston added: "Although the practice has been in existence for several years, you could see that they are putting their money where their mouth is, investing wisely and inwards into their practice, and the recent dramatic changes are manifestly obvious. The many special touches, that they've thought up for themselves, rather than buying in from outside, are what marks them out as a bit special and different from the rest."

Practice Director, Linda Heads, who has masterminded not only the entries, but has been a driving force behind the transformation of the practice, is over the moon at the award.

"We didn't expect to win the top prize because we hadn't won an individual category – we were just delighted to have been runners-up in the most attractive practice category and private dentist of the year," she said.

### **The Winning Practice**

After owning a number of practices in the nearby area, Mike and Linda oversaw the design and build in 1992 of their dream practice, Greenfields House in Stockton-on-Tees. It was the conversion to fully private care in 2006 which gave them the impetus to take things to the next level, making them winners of the PD Most Improved Practice in 2008.

"We knew we had to up our game when we converted to private care" explained Linda. "We wanted a contemporary image to fit with the cutting edge work we did. We also introduced new computer software, and developed a whole new way of working, trying in every way to adapt to the patient journey."

A fully refurbished Greenfields House today houses their general practice, the Dental Healthcare Centre, and the specialist referral practice, Cleveland Cosmetic and Dental Implant Clinic. But they were still looking to improve further. One advantage they had was the space to play about with.

“Our property is large and flexible as dental practices go, so we’ve had room to adapt and move with the times,” Linda said. “Now it’s how we would like it to be, but we could, within reason, change the layout again if we need to in the future.”

This year’s entries for the awards reflect yet more innovation: full redecoration, interior designed by Linda and the team (and some of it carried out by them too) spanking new surgeries. The office includes new digital x-ray equipment and OPT machine; a full new range of patient marketing literature and information e.g. the Smile File, the Smile Brochure, New Patient Questionnaire, letterheads and practice leaflet.

Medivision information software has been installed. This, together with notice board books, treatment information leaflets, electronic photograph frames containing patient notices and before and after photos, keeps patients informed. A Fresh Breath Clinic with a newly purchased Halimeter, run by the hygienist together with a Hygienist referral service, has been offered to local dentists. The new website, which has just swept the board at the Dentistry Awards, is stunning, easy to navigate and generates 10-20 enquiries a week, as well as being well used by dentists to send referrals online.

Meanwhile, the practice carried out a very successful complimentary Velscope oral cancer screening on 130 non-practice patients for Oral Cancer Action Week in 2008. Mike Heads won the “Generosity of a Smile” prize in the Smile Awards 2009.

Nonetheless patient care remains the top priority, with little touches like cushions and fleece blankets provided. Constant attention is paid to patients’ wishes, with closely thought out communications seeking feedback, giving news and contacting enquiring, prospective patients who don’t make appointments, inviting them to come and look around the surgery without obligation.

“Our philosophy is to totally cosset our patients so that they experience a patient journey they would not get elsewhere,” Linda said. “We are also great believers in educating the patient. Our photographic frames in the reception show before and after smiles to see what’s achievable. We have lots of literature, the Medivision software and a nurse will always go through information again after a consultation over a coffee so that the patient can ask questions in a relaxed environment.”

### **Why Enter Awards?**

You would think putting all this into action would be enough for any team, but Linda was keen to see how the practice stacked up against the best.

“Entering the awards was a lot of work, but really we’d done the hardest bit already. If you’ve got a good product, you can sell it so the entries aren’t hard to write,” she explained. “We went in for the awards because we wanted to assess whether what we’d done was just to please ourselves and our patients, or whether we really did match up on a national level. It’s great both to be able to stand alongside some really outstanding practices and also to learn some things from talking to them, seeing their entries and looking at their websites. Dentistry can be lonely

because you get very few opportunities to see what others are doing and to compare yourselves against them.”

Being judged by their peers is particularly rewarding.

“It’s nice that our patients appreciate what we do, but other dentists judging us as good is extremely satisfying,” Linda said. It’s the small, different things that make a good practice a great one, she said. “We make sure we enjoy our working environment as much as our patients do. And if everyone is happy, everything else follows. Mike and I devote an enormous amount of time and effort to this, and it rubs off on everyone else.”

Linda feels that what differentiates them is not only the decor and sense of space but also the atmosphere generated by the staff. “They are friendly, helpful, go the extra mile and are a special team that works well together. That’s what comes across time and again in testimonials,” she said.

They were so excited to win the awards that they texted patients to give them the good news, and have put out press releases locally. The trophies are on display in a lit cabinet, and Linda has put a mention on the website.

“Patients and dentists come to us primarily for the work we do, but the awards are the icing on the cake,” she said.

What is particularly striking about the people who make up this practice is that they have done so much themselves, without buying in expertise from outside. Clearly, Linda and other team members have a real eye for interior design, but they have also fine tuned their systems and procedures, devised marketing ideas, and other patient care touches themselves.

“If you throw enough thought at an issue, you’ll get to the solution,” Linda said.

The team meets regularly and anyone is free to put forward suggestions as to how things might be improved.

“The whole team is on board, having an input and helping to improve and market the practice,” Linda said. “They all have business cards which they can hand out socially if friends or acquaintances ask about the practice. The whole team has made the practice what it is, and won the award together because we’ve done it ourselves, decided what we wanted to do, and implemented it.”

### **Morale Boost**

Entering and being shortlisted for awards is a huge morale boost for the team. A crowd went to London for the PD award ceremony. They made the Dentistry Awards in Leicester their Christmas ‘do’ for the whole team, hiring a coach, taking wine and lunch on board and organising silly games and colouring competitions (with themes like ‘Make Mike Merry’ and ‘Make Linda Lush’) to pass the journey time.

“It pulls us all together and you find out new things about individuals,” Linda said. “For the patients, it’s nice to show them that they have a special dental practice. Many of them may assume that what we do is the norm and they take it for granted. It’s good to be able to show them that we are special.”

### **What’s Next?**

“Consolidation,” Linda said. “We will never stand still because to stand still is to go backwards, but we’ll be working on ways of achieving things more smoothly.”

One thing Linda is interested in is to sit in on some consultations to try and see things from the patient’s point of view.

“I want to see how they are treated, not clinically, but from the point of view of their comfort and how they are greeted, introduced and spoken to. We need to make sure it’s personal and that these things are taking place consistently in the practice,” Linda said.

Winning so many awards in such a short space of time has been a dizzying journey for everyone, but particularly for Linda, who’s been the brains behind it all.

“Our first award was the PD Most Improved Practice in 2008 which was very special for us because we saw we were up against very tough competition, but to come out as the overall winner this year was just fantastic. The quality of the practices that enter and are shortlisted is so high that we were delighted to be able to measure ourselves successfully against them,” Linda said. “The past few months have meant an incredible amount of hard work, but we didn’t do it to win awards; we did the work for our patients, knowing that it was what we wanted to do. The awards were a pat on the back for all our effort.”

Dr. Mike Heads is the 1981 UK BDA/SCADA winner and Past President of SCADA.

### **FACT FILE**

The Dental Healthcare Centre and Cleveland Cosmetic and Implant Clinic, Stockton-on-Tees

Principal: Mike Heads

Practice Director: Linda Heads

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