

INVITING THE PUBLIC IN

Openhouse

Holding an open evening for patients, their relatives, GPs and others can pay dividends for your group practice. **Lorna Slater** shows how her partnership organised theirs

HAVING ANY kind of medical procedure, whether it is elective or a necessity, can be a daunting prospect for a patient.

So providing literature on the subject will certainly educate the patient as to what will happen before, during and after the procedure.

But without a professional to answer concerns, some patients may feel anxious, and rather than looking forward to the change that their procedure is going to mean to their lives, it could cause some concerns.

We meet many people who tell us that they cannot bear the thought of anyone touching their eyes, yet at the same time, they are in desperate need of cataract surgery, or a retinal procedure due to age-related macular degeneration (AMD) or glaucoma.

However, by getting to know the hospital, the consultant surgeon and the team, it can make a whole world of difference to the patients and their families.

At Optegra, we give our patients a rigorous two-hour consultation where they will be seen by clinical technicians, our resident optometrist and the consultant surgeon.

For some patients though, the consultation may be a step too far – and they would prefer to visit the hospital ‘anonymously’ prior to coming in for a consultation. The open evening provides the perfect opportunity for them.

Consultant ophthalmic surgeon Mr Robert Morris says: ‘Patients can meet the surgeon and see the facility, which gives them confidence.

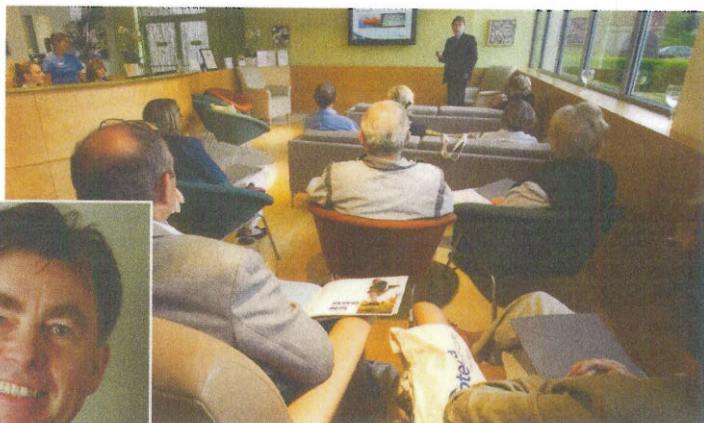
‘If they then book an appointment, they are usually serious about it and come along to their consultation. I think potential patients gain trust during an open evening and that’s why it is important to be honest and not try to sell.’

Open evenings are relatively simple events to organise. Pre-planned media purchasing for advertising the events, catering, staffing and, most importantly, booking the consultant’s time is what it comes down to. We spend on average £700 per open evening on advertising and refreshments

Strong relationships

Many of the guests who come have been recommended by friends or family. Others are family members who have a mother or father coming in for surgery and would like a better understanding about the procedure.

A growing number of our guests have been referred from GP and optometry practices. We pride ourselves on the strong co-management relationships we have with our professional partners and we are constantly adding val-



Ophthalmic surgeon Mr Robert Morris (left) makes a presentation at one of his partnership’s open evenings

ued members to our partnership.

Our partner GPs or optometrists are advised of the open evening dates and are invited along. The consultants always enjoy meeting the referring professionals, as it is a good opportunity to learn more about each other and the benefits of working together.

For those professionals who are thinking about referring patients to us but have not committed, we encourage those to come along too – so they can get a better understanding of who we are and the types of procedures we provide.

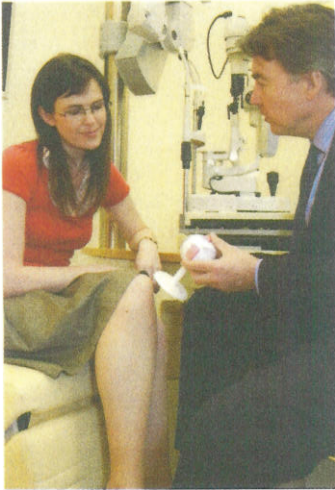
We also find being in the press increases our open evening inquiries. On a number of occasions, we have appeared in the press due to ground-breaking and pioneering ophthalmic procedures which have taken place at the hospital.

More recently, it was for being selected as the first facility in the world to treat patients with severe AMD with a new lens. This public interest generated more general inquiries as well as open evening bookings.

We have learnt the best day of the week to run open evenings is on a Thursday. We can only assume that is because it is towards the end of the week. People have more time and are winding down from work ready for the weekend.

We keep to a routine of running our evenings on the third Thursday of each month.

To allow people to get home from work without rushing, but at the same time not taking up too much of their evening, we start the open evenings at 6.30pm, and usually finish about 8-8.30pm.



Mr Morris explains some equipment to a guest at an open evening

Each month, we have about 15 guests at our open evenings, and there are usually some friends that join them for support who are not necessarily interested in eye surgery.

Mr Morris gives most of our

open evening presentations and usually talks on most eye conditions and treatments for approximately 30–40 minutes. Then this is followed by a Q&A session.

We are delighted to never be short of a stream of questions from the guests wanting to know so many details about the procedures. Sometimes this part of the evening can last for 45 minutes. Our guests are mostly interested in cataract, oculo-plastics, glaucoma, vision correction and retinal treatments, so there is a lot to get through.

We have found it is not just the consultant's presentation nor the Q&A session which will benefit the practice. There are other factors involved, such as the clinical team giving a guided tour. We find that our guests cannot wait to look around the hospital once the consultant has finished.

Optegra is not like a 'normal' hospital, it has the calmness and ambience of a spa – which we

think is the relaxing feeling our patients get as soon as they walk through the door.

With state-of-the-art diagnostics and surgical equipment, our guests are shown exactly which pieces of equipment will be used during their consultation or procedure. Once the guest can see where they will have their procedure, you can almost see the apprehension lift from their faces.

The fundamental reason for giving free monthly open evenings for the public is an extension of our policies to provide as much information to patients as possible prior to their procedure and to provide a personal touch to their whole experience.

The benefits are boundless, as patients learn as much as they want to prior to any treatment. ■

Lorna Slater is marketing co-ordinator at Optegra Eyecare, Guildford, Surrey

TOP TIPS FOR YOUR OPEN EVENING

- Check the availability and level of presenting skills of the person presenting. A confident consultant does not always equate to a confident presenter
- In plenty of time, ask for colleagues to volunteer to help greet guests and to show them around the facilities. Time in lieu is offered back to our staff
- If you are running a series of open evenings, it will be more economical for you to block book media, rather than buying advertising space month by month
- Ask your guests to tell you how they found out about the open evening; it will help your media spend
- Depending on the time of your open evening, lots of food is not always a necessity, but good wine and soft drinks are