

DENTAL HEALTH ON TOUR

Representatives of the Publications Team, Heather Lewis and Fay Higgin, accompanied by President Miranda Steeples, were pleased to join a UK dental press trip, organised by Barker PR, to visit EMS head office in Nyon, Switzerland.

First impressions

We were all very pleasantly surprised when we arrived at the EMS factory. In contrast to what you might imagine a factory floor to look like is a large laboratory-like room where 10,000 devices are made every year. There are no robots here! Each device is assembled by hand by just 60 people. Each individual is trained in every part of the process and rotates through the different work areas to not only ensure attention to detail but also their investment in the end product. Detailed records are kept of every device, and every component part within it, and EMS is proud to report that they record only a 1% fault rate with their machines.

We also learned that EMS is the only company with a 'Professor of Powders' whose role is to develop and continue to innovate powders. EMS dates back to 1981 when Piezon was brought to the market, Airflow followed in 1982. By 2016, the Guided Biofilm Therapy (GBT) protocol had evolved.



Education is key

Not only for the patient, but for the clinicians who employ it in their daily practice the company's focus is firmly on training and maintaining high levels of skills. Currently, more than 1,000 clinicians in the UK are now trained in how to utilise the protocol, (more than 100,000 globally). Education is ongoing and mandatory retraining takes place every two years. Dental hygienists (and in the UK, dental therapists as well) are the primary focus of the company, and you will not be surprised to hear that one of the Directors is a dental hygienist! His journey was interesting: his belief in the system was such that he had introduced GBT into a corporate group for whom he was working. EMS subsequently recruited him to work for them.

Education and motivation of the patient are essential and disclosing fluid is fundamental in the process



(even clinicians miss three times more supragingival biofilm than with the use of disclosing solution). Patients are fully involved in their care and discussions ensue as to their home care regime and how that can be improved, forever building rapport and engaging them in their own self-care.

At the EMS Swiss Training Academy, we were all given the chance to trial the Airflow Prophylaxis Master. For the two clinicians in the room (Heather and Miranda), this was a surprising learning curve! The technology is certainly impressive and it was clear to see how this would be a very pleasant patient experience.

Ethos

The business is currently 75% dental, with the rest medical. The medical side focusses on pain control (shockwave) treatment and urology (kidney stone treatment).

The business' ethos extends to staff; twice every week each member is offered GBT in the on-site clinic. Shockwave (pain control) treatment is also offered and Celso da Costa, the Director and dental hygienist we met, told us how effective he found this for treating an injury sustained while running. This particular form of treatment is becoming increasingly popular with physiotherapists and, as you would expect from the company, is backed up with plenty of research data.

With the focus on education, it was obvious that research data would be needed to confirm any claims of efficacy. Each clinician delivering GBT gives a patient a survey to fill in, the same survey is used all over the world. To date, data are available from more than 220,000 patient surveys; 76,000 alone were issued in 2022. The findings show that 92% of patients prefer GBT to 'standard treatment' (also confirmed by the University of Zurich).

Hygiene – led practices

Many practice owners, as we know, focus financial resources on the dentist as bringing in the most revenue in the practice. It was encouraging to hear EMS argue that this model is upside-down! They advocate that dental practices should be 'hygiene-led', rather than focusing on lengthy expensive treatments that a patient may or may not take up. GBT can be incorporated into all the S3 treatment and management guidelines. The hygiene-led system also ensures greater patient retention as the patient is reassured that the team is invested in maintaining their oral health. If everything is focused on the patient's health, if they are happy and feel cared for by the dental hygienist or therapist, they may then feel more comfortable and reassured to be guided on to needs/wants-type dentistry. This may seem obvious to our members, as typically you are very patient-centric, but it may well challenge the conventional hierarchy in a dental practice!

While in the UK the airflow system has been largely based in private practices, presumably due to the cost of the equipment, it is not insurmountable for use in the NHS.



Within the overall dental hygiene market of the UK, GBT has about 8% share. There are other competitors in the sector and with conventional oral hygiene treatment actually being the biggest 'competitor', there is certainly room for growth.

Barriers remain, however, for dental hygienists and therapists to establish this treatment modality as part of their repertoire, not least the cost of the equipment for resistant practice owners. However, it is possible to build a business plan to make a case for how this can feed in to the turnover of the practice, whilst enhancing patient retention and their experience. It is worth bearing in mind that some clinicians will never be able to utilise such equipment, and thus marketing, including social media, should not be exclusionary or make people feel they are providing an 'inferior' patient experience, because this is not the case. Obviously, a skilled dental hygienist or therapist maintains patient comfort and loyalty. We all have those patients who have followed us when we change practice because of the skill and care they receive.

Nevertheless, it was an interesting opportunity for representatives of the *Dental Health* team to immerse ourselves into the culture and processes of a company who figure quite largely in the UK dental sector. We would encourage our members to check this out for themselves and see how you can make this work for you and your patients.