

3 Questions to... Verena Freier

Verena Freier is a dentist from Bad Soden. Her life has changed a little bit in the last few weeks, she will report how she continued to do her jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic and maybe also how this situation has brought her to other, innovative ideas.

1. How has the current situation changed your professional life and the professional life of your employees and what is the biggest challenge under the difficult working conditions?

Verena: I think that the pandemic is affecting everybody worldwide right now. Especially the profession of dentistry as it is seeing and advising patients every day and at the end of the day, of course, to treat their patients from a safe distance. This has already changed a lot for us. I am glad that we are still here as a system-relevant company and can go to work every day. Of course, the patient situation has changed a bit as well - there are many things that can and have to be postponed or relocated currently, especially in aesthetic dentistry. We notice that too – in the decline of patients in the dental practice.

At the moment, the biggest challenge is not losing our courage. All these hygiene measures have of course adjusted and tightened up, but that's always been part of our job. Now it's simply a matter of seeing the opportunities, because nobody knows exactly when the light at the end of the tunnel will actually come, when things will start to improve again and the biggest challenge is to stay on the ball, to stay positive and to see what we can do with the situation, what possibilities we have, what we can adapt in our procedures, and what ideas can we develop in order to emerge from it stronger.

For example, I introduced an online consultation hour - that was perhaps about 6 weeks ago - when the discussion of lockdown, contact ban, curfew and so on came up. The idea behind it was to give patients the opportunity to contact me and my team, to report problems without actually having to leave the house and come to the practice.

2. As a dentist and practice owner you have a great responsibility both to your patients and to your team. How do you deal with this situation? Do you have fears, doubts, concerns?

Verena: Honestly I am afraid. Something is happening right now that we all don't know yet, where nobody knows how it will end. As a self-employed dentist you are of course first of all an entrepreneur, you run a small business and are responsible for your employees. The fact that it is so difficult to assess a situation is actually what concerns me most at the moment. Of course, there are economic issues involved, because we are currently experiencing a decline in patient visits, due to the discussion about what we are allowed to treat and what not. Additionally, there are also the fears that patients may have. To be honest, I try to see this as positively as possible, we have to get through it now and I always try to be realistically positive towards my team. They are also being briefed daily on what is currently being discussed, how we have to or should deal with it. I also try to give them courage and the security of knowing that I want them to keep their jobs. Nobody would have expected to register short-time work in dental practices, but I am trying to look at the positive side. I use this time now to simply rethink structures in the practice. We are also brainstorming a lot in the team at the moment, we have the time and use it to find out where we might have got stuck, so that we can really put our foot down when things start up again. In the dental practice you already have your workflow and sometimes it's good that you say that it's not optimal and that you have to change something, but you barely ever have the time to consciously think about it and we have that now so we can use it to see where we can improve and come out of this stronger.

3. What will the patients be most afraid of? How can you help alleviate their fears?

Verena: I believe that the main concern for our patients is insecurity. Most of the people out there have no medical training at all, they hear and read what is in the media and often they don't really know how to classify it. I try to explain a lot to my patients - why they don't have to worry about coming to the practice, what the dangers are in the practice, what aerosols are. We actually call all our patients before their appointments and check whether they are ill or not and if they would like to come at all. I believe that with most patients it is actually the case that they do not know exactly –Can I come? Do I have to come? Is the practice even open?

Above all, we have to do a lot of educational work for the patients to take away their uncertainty and make them feel more secure. We also made a video to explain: What is the virus? What does it do? What is dangerous? What is not dangerous? What does it have to do with dentists and what kind of hygiene measures do we have that are effective at this point?

We are learning every day and we are doing our best to make our patients feel safe. Also, in those challenging times we can learn a lot and improve.

