Protected learning time within Enfield Primary Care Trust

Background

Enfield Primary Care Trust is responsible for the health care provision for the population of a large London borough. In addition to taking responsibility for the Trust's 900 direct employees it also provides support for General Practitioners (GPs) and their staff. There are just over 60 practices in Enfield, which range in size from GP practices employing no more than three or four staff to larger group practices which employ as many as 20 staff.

Encouraging HR best practice for such a diverse group is not easy. Some GPs are committed to effective knowledge and information sharing at a professional level and carry this ethos into their practice by encouraging all of their staff to learn and develop. Others question any time spent on staff development.

Promoting HR best practice

Gillian Morris, the HR Manager at the Trust who carries responsibility for promoting HR best practice amongst this group, stresses that she must proceed through influence: 'pointing out the benefits and highlighting the risks'. There are however some opportunities to advance effective learning and one of these is the review of critical incidents. All incidents, clinical or non-clinical, which could have patient or organisational implications, must be reported to the Trust. GPs and their staff are encouraged to review and learn from such incidents.

To assist the process, and promote learning more generally, in 2002 the Trust introduced a protected learning time (PLT) initiative. Each of the three localities in Enfield (Enfield North, Southgate and Edmonton) holds an event once a month. Attendance for GPs and their staff is mandatory, though enforcement is difficult and procedures are currently under review. To support the initiative, and underline its importance, locum GP cover is provided by a GP or co-operative, which is paid for by the Trust. This ensures that while the practice is training, patients will still be able to receive medical attention.

Learning through shared knowledge and experience

These PLT events, which last half a day, are organised by a member of the Trust's staff who has specific responsibility for this activity. GPs and practice staff are asked to contribute items for consideration on future agendas. Each of the three localities, however, has a designated lead GP who will carry responsibility for determining at least part of the agenda. Often, this will take the form of a facilitated discussion on an important recent critical incident. In this way, as well as protected time, there is a strong emphasis on learning through shared knowledge and experience.