

# Defrosting staff pay

James Gransby has some tips on spreading some pre-Christmas cheer

It's not just the weather that's cold. Pay freezes have been in place for some time now. Luckily, practice managers, unlike Bob Cratchit, don't have to deal with the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge. But they do have to contend with a system where tight control is essential if inefficiencies are to be stamped out. Cash is tight in a GP surgery and no one knows this better than practice managers. If wages are seen as a cost centre with a limited pot size, then redistribution of the pot could enable some staff to benefit. Here are some ideas to assist practice managers in putting forward a solid case for pay uplifts, while containing overall costs and preserving partner drawings.

## Hunt down

Over time, a staff member's role changes. Often other staff members have left and their work had been redistributed. One thing that might not have taken place in a busy practice is a reflection on what tasks people do.

- Ask each person to list all of the tasks they perform, no matter how small, and then scrutinise this to see if there is any inefficient time being spent. For example:
- Are any tasks duplicated, or at least looked at by too many people?
  - Can some tasks be scrapped altogether? There may be tasks undertaken because they always have been done. Are they still relevant or just a legacy from days gone by?
  - Are people doing what they are best at? Match pegs with holes and ensure the division of labour is as effective as it can be.

Once the lists have been made, then a round-table discussion can take place on whether anything needs to change. Swap your lists with a trusted practice manager from another surgery to get a fresh perspective. An independent critical eye might spot inefficiencies you haven't identified. At the very least, you can share experiences on how some tasks could be performed more quickly. Taken further, each staff member could be tasked with finding a set number of cost savings from their job. Whether

it be the over ordering of drugs, printing less (i.e. not printing emails by having a more robust filing system), or even just switching the lights off in unoccupied rooms, if enough ideas are forthcoming – and everyone has had an input into the process – this engendering of efficiency could see tangible benefits.

## Redistribute work when an employee exits

A prime opportunity arises where a staff member leaves. Before contacting the recruitment agencies, give some thought to any inefficiencies and whether these can be addressed to give time for the leaving staff member's work to be absorbed. I can already hear the cries of 'but I am already doing the work that X used to do and now you want me to do Y's work, too'.

If, however, staff are bought in to the idea and they can see demonstrable benefits, then they are more likely to be willing recipients of the increased workload. Change your message by saying that those willing to take on some new responsibilities will be in line for extra pay. This will receive a much warmer reception than telling them they have to do more work for no extra pay and that the partners aren't going to 'divi up' any of the pay they are saving.

Take, for example, one person's role that can be redistributed by offering a 5% increase to those willing (and able) to take on some extra work. If the role can be redistributed among four staff on the same wage as the leaver, the partners will see that, although four people are receiving 5% pay rises, there is still a saving of 80% of the leaver's salary going back into the pot.

## Be ruthless when needed

Let's not put too fine a point on it – if there is dead wood, then it needs to be cut out. No one appreciates their pay being suppressed while there are people who are not pulling their weight. The option here is self-explanatory, but often a difficult decision. It is the practices that go about



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## Get more bang for your buck

- Could fewer staff be used at certain times?
- Can staff be mobilised to match funding streams, freeing up existing resources?
- Can working hours be restricted in some cases? There may even be some staff who would be delighted to reduce their hours if asked.
- Might staff wish to convert some salary into buying more annual holiday?
- Are some tasks outsourced, i.e. IT and payroll? If so, is there someone who already works in the practice able to take on these roles – so saving costs?

this with a robust attitude that will prosper. If you can look around your staff and truly say that this doesn't affect your practice, then the difficult decisions have probably already been actioned.

## Say no to overtime

If some staff are given paid overtime, then it is essential they are fully occupied with productive activities during their work time. The permission of overtime should only be granted in exceptional circumstances and, ideally, offered as time off in lieu only. The adage set out in Parkinson's Law that 'work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion' certainly holds true in many cases.

