

Dr. Janet Leith – Owning my own practice

Dr. O'Keefe: So today I'm speaking with Dr. Janet Leith and she's a general dental practitioner in Ottawa, Ontario. Janet, just give us a little bit of your background, you know, generally your professional milestones to date.

Dr. Janet Leith: Thanks John. Well, I've been in practice for 27 years now and I grew up in Montreal but went to dental school in Winnipeg and I loved my time there and I was fortunate enough to do a general practice residency back in Montreal at McGill, the Royal Victoria Hospital, which was an incredible year for me. I learned so much in that year. I then went on to be an associate for three years in Kingston, Ontario. And I loved my time there, but I knew I needed to own my own check as they say. So, I purchased a practice that I became aware of in Ottawa. A friend had worked there, and the lady was going back to become an orthodontist and it was a great fit and I haven't looked back since.

Dr. O'Keefe: What attracted you to buy a practice? What was the need to own your own shack? And tell me about that concept of fit.

Dr. Janet Leith: Well, my journey in dentistry didn't start with dental schools, so I was primed young. I grew up a dentists' kid and I started working in my father's practice when I was 12 years old and he had a solo practice that was very much based on advanced restorative. It was very much one-to-one, lots of great relationships with his patients. And he deliberately kept it small, which at the, you know, at the time was very proper and appropriate. And I found that practicing dentistry that way was a perfect fit. I loved biology, science, math, engineering concepts, so I knew early on I'd be a dentist. And I'm glad I went elsewhere for my training and my residency and associated in different areas, it gave me broader experience so that when... I got to the end of three years of an associate with a wonderful lady and I learned a lot there and Kingston's a beautiful town, but I needed more, I needed a different kind of city and I wanted to really focus on the kind of practice that I wanted to run.

Dr. Janet Leith: And I love restorative dentistry, always have, and that's where my focus has been. So, but I also knew my temperament and myself and I knew that in the end what would make me happiest was to own my own practice and be able to mold my life and my work in the way that best suited me.

Dr. O'Keefe: What's a typical day like for Janet Leith?

Dr. Janet Leith: Well, I'm lucky enough to work four days a week. I used to work four and a half, but I found four days is giving us the lifestyle and the work and serving our patients well. We do work a hard four days. So, we're in the office by 7:30 in the morning, huddle by 7:45, see patients from 8:00 to 5:00 with a lunch break of an

hour. My team gets the lunch break. I'm still working on giving myself the lunch break.

Dr. Janet Leith: And I find that works very well for us and it meets the demands, you know, you have to look at where you're practicing. Ottawa is a very specific kind of town, a lot of government people and they, I find I've had to set up my practice with what kind of bookings and times my patients wanted, and you know, I was trying to mold my own life and other activities as well. Generally, I find on Fridays I'm spending a half day working remotely. I'm lucky enough to be able to login properly into my office software and that's where I work on the bigger stuff. I'll take a look at the reports, I'll spot check things, I'll make sure that notes have been done properly, I'll look at my KPIs, things like that and also work on where I want to take the practice. Over the years I've tried to make sure that I structure my working time so that it doesn't bleed all over the rest of my life, and I find that works very well for me.

Dr. O'Keefe: KPIs is key performance indicators.

Dr. Janet Leith: Yes. Yes.

Dr. O'Keefe: Performance indicators that are important for a general practitioner.

Dr. Janet Leith: Well, I'm still learning about that at this stage. It's a focus I'm working on right now. But I'm heavily looking at, you know, new patient intake but also checking the back doors, as they say. You always want to remember that the patients you have are your biggest asset and you must keep them happy. And so, you know, they say that you should have no less than 5% of your practice turning over and leaving in a year and I'm lucky enough that I've been able to stay under that. So, it's things like that I look at. I've tried never to focus on sell, sell, sell, but always to discuss with my patient, know what their ultimate goals are for their oral health and work together to find a treatment plan. But once I find that treatment plan, I like to always check in and make sure that they've really moved forward on their plan that we worked on together.

Dr. Janet Leith: And if they haven't, I always want to take a step back and say, what happened here? You know, where did we not communicate? What blocks or what challenges did the patient perhaps experience that didn't let them move forward in their care? And you've got to take time for that. That's not something that you can do between patients.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, where do you find time to run the practice, manage the practice or do you have help doing that?

Dr. Janet Leith: I have some help. I take that Fridays to do a half day. I'm trying no longer to do that on my work evenings, you know, work-life balance. I have a great office

manager. I didn't have an office manager all the way along, but as I grew, I've found a fabulous one. And I do outsource help where I need it. I've had a fairly long journey.

Dr. Janet Leith: I've had some experiences with people I've hired as consultants and things and some have been great, some have not been great and some of them are ethical and our visions didn't match well. And I think it's really knowing what kind of a practice you want to have. So, I outsource, you know, I have some companies doing things for me like, you know, marketing and that; very carefully monitored to make sure it's all proper. But, yeah, it's knowing what to outsource and what you can do yourself, within your skillset.

Dr. O'Keefe: What do you like best about being a practice owner?

Dr. Janet Leith: Two things. I love making tooth dust. I'm not gonna lie. I love being in there doing restorative dentistry. I love working up cases, but I love my patients. I've been doing this 27 years now and I've had the journey of seeing children that weren't even born when I bought the practice are now having children and it's humbling, it's wonderful. So, I'm finding as I get into this stage of my practice and my career that I'm focusing more and more and wanting more and more on the relationships. And that's what's giving me a lot of joy these days.

Dr. O'Keefe: Would you have any pearls of advice for people who want to follow your example and buy a practice and become practice owners?

Dr. Janet Leith: I do have a couple of suggestions. Yes. The first thing is, before you buy, make sure you've looked at yourself and know yourself very well and know what kind of practice you're suited for. We're all different. I worked best for years in a solo practice, even I am now going to be getting an associate very soon. I have, as you know, I volunteer in organized dentistry and I have to bring in somebody to help me run the practice.

Dr. Janet Leith: Know yourself. Know what kind of dentistry you like. Know what kind of work environment you like. And know where you perform well and know where you don't perform well. Some of us are very well suited to smaller practices. Some of us love big practices where they're part of a huge group and you've got people to rely on. Some people want to be owners and really need that challenge and also that control in their life. Others don't. Don't let anyone push you into a fit that's not right for you. That's the first thing I would say. Second of all, get a great broker and check them out first. You have to make sure that your values are aligned. A lot of them will say, I had one tell me a few years ago when I was renegotiating, I can set you up in a 10 share practice right on street level.

Dr. Janet Leith: And I went, I know you can't, but that's not the kind of practice I want to run and that's not for me so, thank you very much but this is what I want to do. So,

be careful who you choose to help you in your journey. Make sure you get a lot of references, make sure you've checked them out and make sure you've had great conversations with them before you sign on the dotted line and handover a bit of your hard-earned cash. The other thing, and I constantly say this when I get asked is you don't have to start big and you don't have to buy every toy that everybody wants you to buy. You're going to be saddled with a lot of debt. You're going, if you're buying an existing practice, unless it's brand, brand new, I can tell you from experience, something's going to break down pretty quickly or, and it's going to be big.

Dr. Janet Leith: It's going to be a compressor or a chair or an autoclave or something like that and you are going to not just have the loans you took on but you're going to have maintenance and upkeep to deal with and you also are not going to be as productive in the first couple of years because you're learning, your staff is learning and it's a completely new game. So, don't go whole hog at the beginning. You can add these things as you go along. You can... All those toys you want, add them one by one and make sure they're of value to you in your practice, but keep an eye on the long-term picture rather than the short term, uh, excitement of walking into this massive everything under the kitchen sink practice. You can get there, but it doesn't have to be in your first two years.

Dr. Janet Leith: And I could add in a fourth if I may. If you're ready to buy a practice and you're also, then you're also ready to start a proper plan for your life and to make sure you have proper self-care and proper work-life balance. I made this mistake early on and I didn't and I'm resetting now, and you know, went through the phases of burnout and being overtired and overworked. Not taking care of yourself at the beginning will reduce the kind of patient care you're delivering, the relationships with your patients, and it'll also decrease your production. So, make sure you're taking time out. And I remember going by the chiropractor in my office's front door one day and he had this great sign "Life by design". Make sure when you're planning this journey that you take a look and you design it out.

Dr. Janet Leith: It doesn't have to be every T crossed and every I dotted, but make sure you have a really good idea of what your big picture is and stick to it. There's two things that have been very important for me in having a great career and being very happy and satisfied with what I do. Number one is getting involved. I have very long history of involvement with organized dentistry in Ontario and I love it for two reasons. Number one, I love the sense of community and also, I know that anytime I hear somebody saying, what doesn't somebody do something about this, I know I'm now one of those somebodies that's trying to do something and that helps me feel good and really feel proud of my profession. The second thing that has been key to me in the last several years and these days with online learning and people, especially younger in their practices,

young associates working in multiple places, is they lose that sense of community.

Dr. Janet Leith: And there's a great solution that's available to all of us and that study clubs. And I mean the real live study clubs, where you may get to dinner and you may put your cases on the dining table as you're having dinner and you pass them around or you may bring speakers in. I can't stress enough how that sense of community and that being able to share in that kind of out of the office collegial sense will make you just be a better dentist and a better manager and happier all around. Dentistry has become more isolating with the advent of everything online. And I believe we have to get back to those face-to-face with our colleagues supporting each other kind of events.

Dr. O'Keefe: It's all about people.

Dr. Janet Leith: It's all about people. Yeah, I believe that.

Dr. O'Keefe: Dr. Janet Leith, thank you very much for this time you've spent with me today.

Dr. Janet Leith: Thank you. I really enjoyed it.