Initially CareCredit was founded as a way to provide payment plans for patients who couldn’t comfortably pay for the large up-front cost of implants. Twenty years later, CareCredit has branched out into other areas of care – allowing more than six-million patients to accept needed and life-changing/life-saving procedures.

Recently, Dentaltown Magazine sat down with CareCredit President Mike Testa, Senior Vice President Doug Hammond, Director of Sales Rachael Stutzman and Director of Business Development Bete Johnson, to learn more about the company’s 20-year history as well as its future.

Left: Rachael Stutzman, director of sales; Doug Hammond, senior vice president; and Bete Johnson, director of business development
What are the core values of your company? What has carried through since your founding 20 years ago?

Hammond: Meeting the needs of the dentist. This company is run by the voices of the doctors and dental teams who use our payment plans every day.

What is the most helpful way that you hear that voice?

Hammond: We listen to feedback from a multitude of sources. We have 60 people who are visiting dental practices on a daily basis to help them optimally use CareCredit. We have patient- and practice-service phone representatives in call centers. They’re not just helping, they’re listening and documenting ideas and issues that get reported to us. We have our survey that goes out on a quarterly basis where the doctors tell us how we’re doing. We also work with associations, consultants, and advisory boards.

Stutzman: Let’s not forget Dentaltown.

Testa: We get the street view from the employees who are out in the field and the call center who are interacting with the doctors every day. And then you get the broader view of what’s going on in the profession from the associations, the periodicals, the manufacturers and the consultants that we work with. We meet with all of those constituencies at least eight to 10 times a year. We also run a number of focus groups; we do primary research.

What are the GE influences on the operation of this organization? How is it different than prior to 2002?

Testa: What GE brings a company like CareCredit is, frankly, the ability to invest. As a small company it would have been difficult for us to make the investment of putting 60 people out as a field support force, even though the opportunity was there. To their credit, GE recognized the opportunity and they gave us the funds to build the team and a call center of 200 people that’s exclusive to CareCredit.

Hammond: We have our own credit risk scoring now. We’re not a part of GE’s retail credit portfolio and it allows us to offer higher credit lines and higher approvals.

Stutzman: The other thing that GE is able to invest in that doctors do see, is technology. It would have been very difficult, as a small company, for us to do the things GE has done for us with the online applications, the online transaction processing and the reporting, that practices enrolled in CareCredit now have at their fingertips.

[Editor’s note: CareCredit became a GE Money company in 2002.]

When did CareCredit expand patient financing into other healthcare professions?

Hammond: That came in about 1994-1995-ish. Actually it’s a neat story. An influential veterinarian in Arizona was at a dental seminar given by a dental practice management consultant who talked about financial arrangements and mentioned the name CareCredit. The two of them hooked up afterwards and called me and asked “Can we do vet?” and that’s how we got started in that profession.

Testa: That’s how we’ve gotten started in every profession we’ve been in; even the dental business. We were an implant company and when we asked the doctors how we could help them do more implants, they said, “We have a lot of patients, but implants aren’t covered by insurance. They’re very expensive and patients can’t afford to pay for them.” So we started a finance company to help the dentists do more implants.

How does this benefit your participating dentists?

Testa: Patients have the desire and need to get treatment done. We provide them financial options with a network of doctors in various professions where they could use the card. My desk is filled with letters from patients thanking us for things like, “You saved my dog,” or “I got this procedure that I’d always wanted and I now have the ability to pay for it.” Dentistry is the big winner here in that the dental offices are getting requests from patients every day who primarily accessed CareCredit in another profession. We’ll have more than seven-million patients by the end of the year who have used CareCredit at least once.

continued on page 24
I frequently see other organizations endorse CareCredit. That’s well known. How many endorsements have you established?

Johnson: Currently we have 45 state dental associations and four national associations: ADA, AAOMS, AAP and AGD. Each association allows us to speak to their membership, hear what their needs are and respond appropriately. As with the Dentaltown community, we listen to the voice of the dentist and give them what they need to deliver optimal oral health to patients.

On the technology side of things, there are many exciting innovations at CareCredit, particularly recently. Please describe your most recent product announcement.

Stutzman: I think our most exciting technology advancement lately has been adding new, useful tools and resources www.carecredit.com. We’ve had online patient application processing for a number of years, which is great. Offices love that. They can now process the patient’s fees without having to get off the computer. We’re also integrated into Kodak and Discus Dental practice management software where the patient information is automatically pre-populated from the patient screen to the CareCredit application.

We’re constantly trying to make the program easier for dental teams to use.

You have more than 200 program advisors. What is their role and how are they selected?

Hammond: We’ve been offering on-site training for about 10 years. The advisors are real dental office managers from the local community who are using CareCredit today in their practices. On our behalf, with the doctor’s permission, they’re conducting our initial training.

Hammond: The PDM’s (practice development manager) role is not to train. That’s what our program advisors do. The PDM’s single focus is to visit our enrolled practices, do a lot of best practice sharing, helping the practice understand key ways to maximize patient financing.

Is all of your training done in person if a new office signs up and joins CareCredit?
First Doctors to Sign up with CareCredit Still Fans 20 Years Later

Meet Drs. Gary Weiner and Chester Kaufman – the first dentists to ever use CareCredit. In 1987, Dr. Weiner was approached by Ralph Stern, the founder of CareCredit (which was then named DenCharge), who explained to him his vision of a third-party payment program which would allow dentists to provide the care their patients needed. Dr. Weiner informed Dr. Kaufman about this idea, and they immediately jumped on board. Twenty years later and Drs. Weiner and Kaufman still operate their successful dental office out of Inglewood, California, with 17 operatories, a large and loyal patient base, and CareCredit.

“I believe CareCredit has contributed to the growth of dentistry,” says Dr. Weiner. “On average, I do about 20 percent more treatment than I would without CareCredit.”

“It separates the patient and our office from the finances,” says Dr. Kaufman. “It gives the opportunity to present extensive treatment plans and once they accept, we’re on our way.”

Testa: Eighty percent of practices are trained by our program advisors on-site at the practice. Twenty percent of the practices prefer doing it over the phone because they are familiar with it, they’ve already used CareCredit at another practice, or due to office logistics.

I like that idea of using CareCredit for accounts receivable and using the form letters you’ve got online.

Johnson: Practice teams can go to our Web site, download the letters or scripting and tweak it for their own practice. They can contact their patients who are carrying an A/R balance and roll them over to CareCredit. It’s also a way of taking the burden off of the patient so that they will feel comfortable coming back into the office again for additional treatment, not owing the practice money.

There are still some dentists who do not offer patient financing. Why do you think that is?

Stutzman: I think there are a variety of reasons. Certainly fear of the unknown. Fear of changing something you’ve been doing for maybe 20 years in your practice. Maybe the doctor goes to a seminar and hears how great patient financing programs are but then he goes back to the office and he’s so busy doing his dentistry that he really doesn’t have time to sign up, nor implement the program.

Do you have any closing comments?

Testa: We talk a lot here about the fact that there are no answers in this building. The answers are with our practices – talk to the doctors, talk to the patients, talk to the profession. You recently asked me, Tom, if we can digitize the application and put signatures on it, and guess what, I’m going to go back to my desk and I’m going to write myself a note asking “Why don’t we do that?” And that’s where the answers come from.

Hammond: One of the strengths of CareCredit is that we have a passion for what we do. There’s nothing that’s been more exciting for me than to hear from patients that we’re meeting their needs. The neatest thing that’s happened to me in the last several years is when I hear from patients and they thank me! Somebody doing the electrical at a trade show saw that I was from CareCredit and she said, “You’re from CareCredit? You saved my dog’s life!” My brother-in-law got his Lasik through CareCredit, my uncle got his chiropractic done through CareCredit, I’ve had my new dental implant done through CareCredit… We feel that we’re doing a good thing, not only for the profession but for the patients who are out there. That drives us on a daily basis.

Johnson: When I first met Doug (Hammond), he told me CareCredit was all about our relationships with the profession and with patients. Business happens. If you have a problem in business or as business grows, it’s just business. But if you have a relationship, it’s sustainable and you have the opportunity to do great business. Our role is to understand what is needed, exceed expectations with our delivery, constantly listen, respond and innovate.

Stutzman: It’s always rewarding to be able to go a dental meeting and be recognized, thanked and appreciated by doctors, consultants, speakers and association leaders. When they treat us like their peers, like we’re a contributing member of the team, that’s extremely rewarding.