



ANITA CARES

Last month, *Lingerie Buyer* was invited to accompany a group of retailers to Anita's headquarters and production facilities on a Centres of Excellence training course for mastectomy lingerie to find out more about both the products and the company that makes them.



The Centres of Excellence scheme is the baby of Jemma Barnes, Anita UK's general manager. When she joined the company 18 months ago there was no training programme for the UK and Ireland, and she wanted to create a recognised course that would give the end consumer confidence in the service they receive from retailers, and breast care nurses confidence in where to send their patients.

The training has been running since 2010, and already there is a waiting list. There are 12 retailers on this trip, with businesses that vary from department stores to specialist shops and even a medical supplies company. They are Katherine and Pauline Conway from Bravelle, in Limerick, Ireland; Lesley Shaw and Jean Pugh from Bouncing Back in Gateshead; Patricia Powell from Arnotts Dublin; Noreen Reilly from O'Hara Medical, also in Dublin; Becki Reynolds and Sara Kirk from Affair Lingerie in Pontefract; Laura Potts and Linda Carter from Banbury's of Barnstaple and Tiverton; Susan Griffin from Betty and Belle in Altrincham; and from Athens, retailer Aliko Georgopoulou.

As well as giving retailers the opportunity to familiarise themselves with Anita's products and fitting techniques, the training is an essential element of Anita's aim to improve the service available to women who have had breast surgery. Talking about the current situation in the UK, Jemma explains that there is a gap between the retail and hospital elements of care provided to post-surgery women, and it is the patients who are losing out.

'If a lady goes to a breast prosthesis fitting wearing the wrong size bra, she won't be comfortable. If she goes to a specialist retailer for help, the retailer can put the lady in the right size – but then the prosthesis won't fit. We want to train retail outlets to understand the prosthesis process, and in conjunction with this we are running training for breast care nurses to help them identify problems with bra fit. If they can do this, they can send patients to a Centre of Excellence to get properly fitted before they have their prosthesis fitting. My aim is that no one should have to travel more than an hour to receive the care and service they need.'

The two days of the trip are structured to show retailers not only the latest products but how they are made and how the business is run. The current head of this family business is Mr Weber-Unger, and his devotion to detail and quality

informs everything the company does – which becomes apparent early on when we are taken on a tour of the huge logistics facility in Kufstein, Austria. The first thing we see is the quality control station, where random samples of all the products that come in are checked. If any product does not meet the company's exacting standards, then the random sampling becomes a full-scale QC of that shipment.

All Anita's production from across the world comes into the 10,000 sqm Kufstein facility, which processes about 15,000 products per day. At any one time, facility manager Andreas Perktold explains, there are about 400,000 pieces waiting to be packed, and 800,000 in stock. There are also another 300,000 pieces of swimwear in another facility. Yet staff can monitor where any individual piece is in this vast system, which is essential as Kufstein delivers to 71 countries and sends out around 1,300 boxes of lingerie a day.

This is a huge operation, and it would be easy for a company of this size to appear impersonal and remote, but the rest of the trip quickly dispels any such notion. When Anita's Anni Osarogie talks about what makes Anita unique, she explains its core principle – to help any woman find the right bra and feel special whether that is a Care bra, a maternity bra, something for larger cups or just a pretty, comfortable bra. 'We want to have the best product for our customers and we always want to improve what we do, so we encourage feedback. We see any problems as a chance for us to do something better and this makes us stronger.'

And indeed Anni sits through the subsequent training sessions with education manager Beate Raupach, recording comments and any requests for new products. She is also on hand to explain why sometimes things are not possible, or that the product is already in development.

Beate is in charge of training on these trips, and covers the latest mastectomy lingerie and swimwear products, prostheses and fitting techniques. She is helped by models, Elfi and Rosi, both women who have undergone surgery for breast cancer and have been working with Anita to demonstrate its products for ten years and more.

While Elfi and Rosie model the Care styles, Beate explains their construction and benefits to give the retailers a thorough understanding of the new bras they will be selling,



and any changes to products already in stock. As Beate passes round examples of different components, it's the little details that stand out. Underwires that look bent have in fact been made deliberately uneven to fit the body's contours, and the body side of the wire is rounded so that it rolls with movement. Moulded cups have hidden side slings built in for extra support, made from a special material that prevents them from yellowing over time.

What else stands out as the day goes on is the care gap between hospitals and retailers. Some of the women on the trip have been through breast surgery themselves, and all are working with women everyday who are dealing with the after effects of breast cancer. These can vary significantly, and it's emotional just hearing about the problems women can face. That some could be eased by something as simple as a well designed and fitted bra and prosthesis, and yet aren't for so many women, is sobering.

For example, Beate shows Anita's compression bras for use after surgery. These are more medical garments than lingerie, and can be fitted on the operating table to help compress the breast to aid healing and limit damage to the lymphatic system. Quite often women are advised by hospitals to buy sports bras instead, which do compress the breast, but as they are not designed for this use, they're not as effective. 'The Anita bras are more expensive,' says Gemma, 'but for the women who wear them they are a comfort blanket. With the bra on, everything is where it is supposed to be and they are comfortable.'

Price and quality is a subject that keeps coming up. Anita bras are not cheap, but neither are they elaborately designed with decorative details and yards of beautiful lace. It becomes apparent, listening to the discussions, that all the retailers have been challenged by customers at one time or another over price. Anita's quality is all in the details. That's not to say that the company does not produce pretty lingerie, just that aesthetics, in the specialist product areas at least, have to work around performance and function.

Later in the day Michael Brinkmann gives an eloquent explanation of just how much work goes into an Anita bra with his presentation on materials, functionality and performance. He demonstrates how many different materials are used in one bra – how the fabric has to vary

between the cups and the straps, for example – and the vast array of size variations that have to be worked out by designers for just one product.

The intricacies are most keenly apparent when it comes to moulding cups. Up to 60 percent of Anita's bras have moulded cups, and the process is challenging, he explains. Fabrics are delicate, temperatures are high, and measurements need to be worked out by millimetres. A variation of just one or two degrees can change results. Every fabric is different, and room temperature can fluctuate, so the equipment has to be constantly adjusted.

The following day we see the moulding in action. Anita is unusual in doing its own moulding, and the company also develops its own moulds and is constantly tweaking equipment. It's when seeing the care with which the fabric is first moulded and then cut out and checked for accuracy, that one retailer declares she will never complain about the cost of an Anita bra again.

It's a feeling that seems common to all the ladies on the trip. It's one thing knowing a bra is well made and uses good quality materials, it's another seeing just how much thought has gone into its components and construction. Actually seeing these things makes the quality argument easier – After all, if the person selling the product really believes in it, they are that much more convincing.

This is just as relevant for the other element of Anita's mastectomy offering. About 30 percent of the company's business is in the sale of full and partial breast forms, and over the two days we have a chance to not only learn about and handle the latest products, and practice fitting them, but also see the manufacture of the prostheses in action – a process that is largely done by hand with a minimum of automation and a lot of dedicated attention to detail.

First are the product demos, and to illustrate just how far technology has advanced, Beate passes round examples of prostheses from up to 40 years ago. Heavy, cumbersome and uncomfortable even to look at – some are rubber, others filled with, of all things, wallpaper paste – these old breast forms are a million miles from the silicone products currently available to women. Although even these can be heavy, especially in the larger sizes, and Anita has

developed new lightweight breast forms that are 25 and 35 percent lighter than standard silicone. Beate explains that they are good for women suffering from Lymphoedema as a result of breast surgery.

In 70 percent of cases of breast cancer surgery across Europe, a lumpectomy is carried out rather than a full mastectomy, and one of the most useful and popular breast forms that Anita offers is Sequitex 1045. This is a partial form that can be used on all areas of the bust, and its volume can be adjusted by adding more or less medical fleece. It's a popular product for the retailers present, and also among breast care nurses because it is so versatile, allowing tiny little tweaks that can make a big difference.

Anita produces a wide range of full and partial forms, and the group has a chance to handle most of them – we are even given a demonstration by Beate on the use and care of a new adhesive prosthesis, and two workshops show the retailers how to select the correct size, and how to fit both Anita's bras and breast forms. Then following day we visit the prosthesis manufacturing facility, where 60 employees produce around 160,000 breast forms a year.

Stephan Volk, who heads up the facility, talks us through the materials and the exacting process of production. Even with skilled and practised workers, making prostheses is not quick – each step can take time, from two days to make an initial mould, to half an hour to make the film, and an hour and a half to bake the prostheses after they have been filled. They are then cleaned and trimmed by hand, before each and every one is quality inspected.

This final tour in many ways sums up what the whole trip has been about – a deepening of understanding not just about the products and the brand, but the little things that make such a difference. When asked if the training has been useful, everyone is enthusiastic. This is such a sensitive area, and each individual's requirements can be so different, that really knowing what you are doing and what you are selling is so important. And that's what it means to become an Anita Care Centre of Excellence. ♥