

PATIENT SCHEDULING

Making the front desk work more effectively



BACKGROUND

The front desk is an important part of the dental practice that is often underappreciated. It's the first contact for most patients and can set anxious patients' minds at ease and allay anxiety. It's also essential for setting the tone and shaping the patient's impression of the rest of the office, including how patients relate to the dentist, other staff members, and treatments that are delivered. The interactions that occur between the front office and new patients can result in long-term patient relationships that benefit the office in untold ways. A quick review of areas where improvements can be made in front desk performance was done.

FOCUS THE CONVERSATION

Front desk personnel should understand that new patients' initial contact is focused on scheduling an appointment. This call doesn't need to be about anything else. Clinical issues, insurance matters, and other details can wait until the patient is in the office. New patients can be anxious or uneasy, so filling the conversation with medical or other jargon can escalate that anxiety and make them feel even more uncomfortable.

All of the patient's questions and concerns should be addressed, but the bottom line is to make an appointment. The front desk personnel should welcome the new patient, make him or her feel at ease, and set up the initial appointment.

TAKE CONTROL

The front desk team should also take the lead in the conversation. It's wise to avoid any awkward exchanges and simply assume that the patient is calling to schedule an appointment and begin the process. A useful tool is a basic conversation template for new patient calls. This can provide for smoother interactions and prepare the front desk personnel to do their job well. It doesn't mean that the team simply recites a set of scripted or canned responses but that they are prepared with what they need to get new patients on the schedule.

CONFIRM AND COMMIT

The initial call should be concluded by confirming the appointment specifics. This helps avoid missed appointments that occur because of poor communication regarding day and time.

The front desk personnel should also have the patient commit to keeping the appointment and being on time. To do this, the staff can state, "The dentist and team have reserved this [day and time] for you. We look forward to seeing you then. If an emergency

arises, would you please call me and let me know at least 48 hours in advance?" Stating this as a question makes it more effective, forcing the caller to answer and commit. This verbal promise makes it more likely that the patient will follow through with the appointment.

SEEK REFERRALS PROACTIVELY

Many opportunities to obtain referrals from new patients are missed because the front office doesn't know how or when to ask. Missed chances can be reduced by telling all staff members to ask for referrals whenever a patient gives the practice a compliment. Basically a compliment is like the patient giving a "green light" to ask for a referral. The entire team needs to actively listen and ask whenever they get the green light. When asking, they should stress how important referrals are to the practice, which gives a sense of urgency to the request.

OTHER WAYS TO IMPROVE THE PRACTICE

The dental office can nearly always be improved in some way. Among the big-picture ways to grow your practice are the following:

1. Look at the entire practice through the eyes of your patients.
2. Convey more than the clinical benefits of your care. It's important to communicate why patients should care.
3. Track new patient referrals to gauge patient experiences. If your practice is operating optimally, at least 80% of new patients should come from referrals.

Clinical Significance

Dentists should rely on their front desk to be the welcoming face of their practice. They need to equip front desk personnel with the tools to be able to make appointments that are kept and to ask for referrals whenever it seems appropriate. Looking at the entire practice from the perspective of the patients who come through the door should help to identify areas that may be lacking and to make changes that will result in better performance.

Scheduling Institute: Front desk success. *Dentaltown*, Sept 2018, pp 70-73

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