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Cancellations: money down the drain



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Appointment cancellations with the hygienist can be detrimental to the success of a dental practice. Business coach Ashley Latter demonstrates how tried and tested deterrents can work wonders

If you think about this, who suffers the most? It is most likely to be the patients – they are not receiving the treatment they need and they may suffer from oral diseases later in life as a result.

Education's what you need

It is crucial that the whole practice team comprehensively educates the patient – one practice admitted to telling patients that the hygienist simply 'cleans their teeth for them'. Will that really encourage patients to visit and pay for the privilege? Probably not. You need to ask how your patients perceive this service, and whether they can appreciate the difference between a dentist and hygienist.

So it is all down to education. If you really want to reduce the number of cancellations, you must make the time to educate patients so that they don't waste your time in the future. A lot of patients who move from NHS to private treatment have never visited the hygienist before, so it may be a new concept for them. Appeal to the patients' interests and make the benefits clear. Have a standard speech prepared and speak in a language that the patient will understand. You could also use an analogy. For example, you service your car so that it runs properly and won't break down – visiting the hygienists once a year prevents disease and enables you to sleep with your teeth in your mouth as opposed to next to them!

Changes to practice policy

In addition to the above, you should clearly explain the appoint-

ment procedure policy within your practice. The policy should include:

- The hygienist's time is sacred and they have a busy schedule booked weeks in advance
- Take a deposit to secure the appointment beforehand and settle the balance on the day
- Adopt a policy that, unless it is an emergency, there will be a charge for cancelled appointments with the hygienist
- Back this up with a confirmation letter to the patient and ring them to confirm everything three days before hand.

It does work

A practice that I have been working with in south Manchester adopted three major changes over three months, reducing their cancellations by 50%. These include:

- The dentists spend five minutes explaining the hygienist's role and the advantages of treatment to patients
- The hygienist then spends a further five to 10 minutes building a relationship with the patient, explaining once more in their own words the role and the benefits, before the patient jumps into the chair
- They have increased their hygienist appointments by 10 minutes.

So there are some simple tips that should help you reduce the number of cancellations and also reduce your practice losses. The most important thing to do is to measure on a monthly basis and keep score. It is only when you measure that you begin to make serious progress. n

On a recent programme, I was coaching seven practices and their teams to significantly reduce the number of cancellations and turn this into a profit-making centre as opposed to a loss. The figures recorded varied from practice to practice, ranging from £15,000 to £85,000. We came up with these figures by calculating how many appointments were cancelled i.e. number of hours lost multiplied by the hourly rate.

For example, one practice calculated that they had two hygienists working for a combined total of 7.5 days per week, with a 25% cancellation rate. With an hourly rate of £100, this resulted in a lost income of £70,000. As the costs were already fixed, this amount was coming straight off the bottom line. Another practice only had a hygienist in for one and half days a week, costing the practice over £12,500. However, this does not even take into consideration the receptionist's time lost with booking new dates, sending out new letters and confirmations: hidden costs that really have to be acknowledged. The situation becomes even worse when practices have to pay the hygienist: regardless of whether they work or not. In short, this situation can be extremely damaging to practice team morale.

Why does it happen?

Once the calculations were complete, we began to discuss why we thought this was happening. There are several reasons including:

- Patients do not make a priority of visiting the hygienist
- Poor time management on behalf of the patient
- Poor dentist-patient communication
- Poor communication among the team, i.e. no consistent message to patients
- Lastly, we thought that visiting the hygienist was not a concept sold well by the whole team; including the hygienist themselves, i.e. patients were not educated in terms of the benefits and consequences.

Change your policy

Work the following points into your practice policy and you should see results:

- The hygienist's time is sacred and they have a busy schedule booked weeks in advance
- Take a deposit to secure the appointment beforehand and settle the balance on the day
- Adopt a policy that, unless it is an emergency, there will be a charge for cancelled appointments with the hygienist
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