



Going paperless: It's not just for big practices

Being paperless has become something of a status symbol in dentistry, and with good reason. Paperless practices run more efficiently and are usually equipped with the kind of sleek technology that makes a big impression on patients. For many small dental practices though, the idea of going paperless can be intimidating. However, in my experience building a paperless small practice, I have found that the right technology partner can help pave the way for a smooth experience. The end result has helped us create a practice image that tells patients we are interested in more than technology — we're focused on being green, as well.

Laying the foundation

After having worked in various practices for approximately seven years, I began the process of determining how to begin my own practice. At the time, the economy was at its peak, and it soon became clear that acquiring an existing practice would be more expensive than building my own. While the existing practices I looked at had great patient pools and other advantages, none were paperless, and going paperless was a primary goal of mine. With this knowledge, I began the process of designing and building a practice that would function as a reflection of my personal values and my philosophy of dentistry.

Foremost among my values was creating an eco-friendly office, and this informed every aspect of the construction of my practice. This was one of the primary reasons that going paperless was so important to me. By constructing a practice without the need to consider storage for charts, I was able to keep the practice's footprint small and efficient. Our six operatories fit into approximately 2,400 square feet.

I chose to utilize Patterson Eaglesoft Practice Management Software to go paperless, and worked closely with Patterson to develop a system that would

meet my goals. In addition to the software, our practice also utilizes Eaglesoft's e-services, including electronic claims processing, electronic billing, electronic attachments and e-reminders. I have found that the vast majority of patients are very receptive to having receipts and walk-out statements emailed to them, and we utilize an electronic signature pad for patients to sign treatment consent forms. With these tools, most of our appointments are indeed paperless in a very strict sense. In fact, I estimate it takes us six months to go through a single case of paper. An additional advantage of not printing out documents is that there is no shredding required to keep our patients' information safe.

A cost-effective change

Many small practice owners may think that going paperless is not a cost-effective or achievable goal for them, but I have found that the savings really do add up enough to make sense. While I had the advantage of starting a new practice — without years worth of paper charts to scan and convert — there are practical ways of slowly and steadily converting existing charts. I began my practice by carrying more than 18 months worth of new patient records from my last office, so I found that it made sense to hire a temporary employee to scan this relatively small number of records into our digital system. This approach may make sense for other small practices. Another alternative for an existing practice would be to begin with a digital record for new patients, and convert existing patients' records as they come in for six-month recall appointments. In this way, the conversion could be largely accomplished within six months to one year using only existing staff.

In terms of cost-effectiveness, our greater efficiency with digital charts helps our paperless system pay off. We



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no longer have the need to file charts or confirm patients, and as previously mentioned, our office itself is smaller because we do not store charts. Patient information can be accessed from any computer in the office, and even by multiple users at once. There is no longer a wait for a chart to be passed from the front office to the hygienist to the dentist, so I am able to examine a patient's chart from my office while the front desk is simultaneously processing their record and the hygienist is preparing to bring the patient back to the operator.

Our digital imaging system also plays a key part in our paperless and eco-friendly practice. We have no need for chemical film developers and have the added advantage of being able to review X-rays in seconds. Patients also appreciate that the digital system exposes them to less radiation, and they recognize how fast and efficient it is.

Environmental consciousness

In addition to going paperless, our office was designed with the most environmentally friendly materials possible, and we also work hard in our daily practice to minimize waste. The office space itself has large windows, which allows us to utilize as much natural light as possible. Our

compressors and vacuum pumps are energy efficient, and laundry is handled onsite with energy efficient washers and dryers. We also handle our own medical waste. All of the products used in the construction of the practice were carefully selected, from the low-VOC paint, to the faux wood flooring and decorative trim. We also selected reception room chairs that can be reupholstered instead of discarded and replaced.

Furthermore, there is no storage room in the office, which was an additional design feature planned to reduce our office footprint. We keep just one to two weeks' worth of supplies in the office, which prevents us from losing supplies in a closet. A staff member uses our supply management software to reorder stock in the most efficient way, streamlining our deliveries. We also try to do business with other offices that share our values for the environment.

While running an eco-friendly practice has always been my personal vision, I also work to ensure that staff members are motivated to think green. I offer a bonus on a monthly basis to staff members who offer new ideas to help our practice be more environmentally friendly. We also work together to reduce waste of disposable products. For instance, my assistants know not to set out an excess amount of gauze for a procedure when it is likely it will only be thrown away.

Seeing rewards

After three years in practice, the rewards of these efforts are beginning to compound in patient loyalty and a strong practice image. Several patients have told me they began coming to our practice because they were looking for an office that was digital. As patients become more and more aware of the technology that is available in dentistry, I expect there to be an even greater patient preference for digital practices. I have also found that our patients appreciate our environmental responsibility, and that this philosophy actually attracts patients who are themselves conscientious and responsible.

Being paperless is part of the foundation of our practice's image. While it may seem like a daunting transition to make, I have found that the rewards far outweigh any negatives in upfront investment. I have also seen how our system's greater efficiency will continue to pay off for the life of the practice, and I recommend that other small practices make this investment in their future.

Dr. Monica T. Lee and her staff are committed to treating their patients' dental needs in every way. Dr. Lee has been creating beautiful, healthy smiles since 1999. After graduating from the University of Southern California School of Dentistry, she received an Advanced Education in General Dentistry while serving as a Captain in the United States Air Force. Dr. Lee is a Fellow in the Academy of General Dentistry.



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