

MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY DAY!

For many dentists, 2008 was quite a challenging year. There is no question that there is a new reality out there economically and in order to survive and even to thrive, dentists are going to have to rethink their procedure mix as well as the focus of their practices.

Scheduling is among the most challenging jobs in the dental office and it is even more challenging today as there have been reports of increases in cancellations and patients putting off elective work and even trying to push off needed treatment for as long as possible.

In our office we have never used any kind of block scheduling system. We have one philosophy – get the scheduled filled to make the day as productive as possible. The key to a productive schedule is being flexible – while you may want to keep some time open for a bigger case, at some point you may need to realize that it is more important to have any kind of patient in your chair than have dental chairs sitting empty because you believe in block scheduling.

The dental office schedule on a day-to-day basis is very dynamic – there are additions, cancellations and it needs to be constantly managed. It must almost be managed by everyone in the office. While the front office manager is the quarterback of the schedule, the dental assistants, the dental hygienists, and especially the dentist needs to be cognizant where they are in the schedule at any given time.

There are so many instances where we may be running ahead of schedule and can then pull over a patient from hygiene who needs some operative dentistry or an endo or a crown. This has been called the “stay today” philosophy and it is certainly a healthy addition to every schedule.

Don't resign yourself to cancellations in your schedule. If something opens up in hygiene, we will ask the patients in our chairs if they are due for a prophylaxis and if they would like to stay. If there is some time in the doctor's schedule that all of a sudden appears, we will offer the appointments to the hygiene patients if they need treatment or call patients in early and try to fill that spot.

When you are in the office, you need to be staying as productive as possible. Emergency patients should be told to come in right away. If you want to conduct an interesting experiment, anonymously call ten dental offices in your area and tell them that you have a dental emergency. I will bet that seven out of ten cannot get you in for an appointment for at least a day. I have personally made these calls and I have heard offices tell me I had to wait two weeks for an appointment. I am always amazed that the most productive dental offices that I know can get a new patient or an emergency patient in today while many low producing dental offices cannot get a patient in for a week or two.

In this day and age we can learn a lot from services like 1-800-DENTIST who are professionals at doing this – if someone calls with a dental emergency, tell them to come in right now. Dentists always wonder why patients call 1-800 DENTIST and the answer is really simple – they don't get a busy signal, they don't get a voice mail, they get to a live, caring person who is going to take care of their needs promptly and efficiently. If you would like to know how they do it, go to www.goaskfred.com , a free website where you can even ask your own questions on marketing, and read through some of the material. I think it should be mandatory reading for the entire dental team so we can all learn to manage the schedule efficiently.

2009 will be a challenging year, that is for sure. We need to meet that challenge head on with changing the way we look at our offices and especially at our schedules. Downtime is no longer an option and everyone in the office is responsible to make sure that we all stay as productive as possible.

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