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Practice Management Articles



Taking Your Practice from “Good to Great”

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Now is the time to turn up the heat on your commitment to move your practice from “good” to “great”. In this article, I’ll share with you what is working for great practices and how they handle making dentistry affordable as well as the advanced scheduling techniques.

Making Dentistry Affordable for More Patients

Once the dentistry has been diagnosed, planned and presented we must find ways to fit the financial investment comfortably into the patient’s budget and individual financial situation. The temptation of the past was for the practice to act like a bank and carry a high accounts receivable by offering long term payment plans. This is no longer considered common practice for present day dentistry due to the labor required for collections, hundreds of statements, postage costs and numerous collection calls required to collect. Not to mention jeopardizing the patient relationship because accounts are overdue.

The “Great” practices and their teams have made a commitment to get out of the banking business and have significantly changed the way they think about billing by aligning themselves with a third party financial partner. Health Smart is just one example of a third party company available in Canada and the practices who are taking advantage of their programs are achieving higher case acceptance and eliminating their accounts receivable.

The following are strategies to move a good practice to a great practice in regards to the financial health.

- Create a proactive financial policy that the entire team understands and can present to the patient at any time no matter what role they play in the practice. Educate the team on why billing can no longer be a part of the practice philosophy and fee for service will maintain the practice’s level excellence. The policy should be consistent, clearly written and signed by the patients prior to treatment. Acceptable options include cash, cheque, major credit cards, debit or third party financing.
- Consider offering patients a 5% cash courtesy, or accounting reduction for prepayment at time of scheduling treatment. This option allows the money to be deposited in the bank before the

treatment is rendered. Because of this, you are happy to pass along the 5% savings due to the saved time in confirmation, collections and receivable management. If the patient pre pays they are assured to show up for their scheduled appointment and this reduces stress in the scheduling department. Be aware if insurance is involved, the reduced fee must be submitted and communicated to the insurance company.

- Use effective verbal skills in your presentation skills as well as your non verbal enthusiasm.

Some verbal skills may sound like the following:

“We are proud to offer you ways to fit the dentistry that you want into your individual financial budget.”

“We are committed to making our high quality dentistry as cost effective as possible”

“To assist you with your healthcare investment, we provide the following payment options, Pre payment courtesy, Cash, cheque, credit cards or a payment plan”

A patient’s behavior changes when the financial obligation is taken out of the practice because they no longer attach the dental service or the appointment to the financial obligation.

Organized Advanced Scheduling

Once the dentistry is accepted and there is a signed financial agreement, scheduling can occur. In our consulting work, one of the biggest challenges we see practices dealing with on a daily basis is how to effectively schedule to maximize time and efficiency.

Dentistry is the only health care profession that does not structure their days based on procedures, operator fatigue or pre planning by procedures. A common practice is to just fill the blanks with as many patients as they can, squeeze in the last minute emergency patients and guess at how much time is needed for procedures while hoping the dentist will be able to check 1-3 hygiene patients. This lack of method of scheduling causes high stress, low productivity and serious time management for the patient

“Great” scheduling is best defined as organizing each and every day for a variety of procedures, set aside emergency time and making sure procedures have been analyzed for time accuracy. The goals of great scheduling are to see fewer patients — yet do more dentistry per patient.

Advanced scheduling also helps you decrease stress, respect patients’ time, and provide last-minute emergency care smoothly.

Schedule the middle of the day appointments first

The middle of the day is usually the hardest to fill, so fill them first! Those 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. appointments are easy to fill and are your prime time. The middle of the day is the best time to pre-block emergency time, if the patient has a true emergency (up all night, swelling, extreme pain) they will find a way to arrive in the middle of the day. Don’t let your emergency patients make you run behind or adversely affect the schedules of your other pre scheduled patients. The most successful time for practices to pre block emergencies is usually last appointment of the morning and first appointment after lunch.

Pre-block Primary appointments in advance

Pre-blocking the schedule reserves specific times for specific procedures. It allows a variety of procedures to be performed every day and manages an even flow of productivity for financial goals. It also provides a template for your team of what an ideal week entails, their roles, and what has to be delivered each day in hygiene and restorative. Determine a daily production goal that is realistic and supports the profitability of the practice. If you pre-block half of every day for primary procedures you will be assured to reach your daily goals as well as have a variety of procedures in every day.

Primary procedures have the highest dollar per hour rate available in each department. For example, primary appointment blocks in the restorative department are crowns, veneers, bridges, root canals, and quadrant dentistry. The doctors schedule is pre-blocked 4 to 6 weeks in advance and hygiene should be pre-blocked 6 months in advance for primary procedures such as active therapy root planning, comprehensive oral evaluations (COE's) and multiple sealants.

The key to pre blocking is to be disciplined and not schedule with any other procedures unless it is a desperation situation. The restorative department holds their blocks until 48 hours prior to the scheduled times and hygiene holds them open until 4 days prior to the day.

Manage Hygiene Exams

Eighty percent of the restorative primaries come from the diagnosis on the patients of record in the recare exam. A doctor should be able to check hygiene patients at the natural breaks in his/her schedule. If there is multiple hygiene, the doctor should take the opportunity to cruise entire hygiene department and complete them all at once.

To effectively support the doctor, the hygienist needs to have a procedural flow to appointments so that all diagnostic information is collected in the first 15 minutes of each recare appointment. It is much easier to break in the hygiene treatment for a check then wait until the end of the appointment.

Once the hygienist has collected all diagnostic information they can let the doctor know that they are ready for a check and he/she has 30 minutes to get there. If the dentist can't leave their operatory right away they have some flexibility as to how soon they need to be in hygiene. Do not wait until the end of the hygiene visit to ask for a check, this almost always will cause the schedule to run behind. Great practices usually do not have stress and frustrations related to the doctor checking hygiene by following these simple systems.

In summary a "GREAT" dental practice possess a high performing team of auxiliaries, are effective communicators with their people skills, provide eloquent case presentations, make dentistry affordable and utilize advanced scheduling principals. Hundreds of other practices across Canada are enjoying the fulfillment and rewards of being truly "great" by choosing to look at the future with excitement, openness to change old habits, have the curiosity to learn and the passion to be better than you were yesterday.