

Maximizing Hygiene

When I started my career in dentistry, patients looked forward to visiting with the hygienist as much as they do today, but doctors had some misconceptions about the position. They assumed that hygienists merely cleaned people's teeth and that hygiene, while necessary, was always a money loser. Sadly, many doctors still feel this way. It's time to push these antiquated stereotypes aside and begin to truly value hygienists. Doctors need to wake up and smell the fluoride. Perhaps they need to revise their own expectations. A healthy, happy, and yes—even *profitable*—hygiene department is possible.

Many doctors do not communicate their expectations when hiring a hygienist. Then within weeks they are complaining about what their new hygienist is or is not doing. In well-run practices, the kind that work with the speed and fluidity of a Nascar pit crew yet the care and attention to detail of Smithsonian curators, the hygienists do much more than clean teeth. Unless an office employs a hygiene assistant, the hygienist is responsible for the basic duties of sterilizing and preparing the treatment room, greeting the patient, taking radiographs, full mouth perio probing, using the intra oral camera to formulate a pretreatment exam that notes all areas of concern for the doctor to check and confirm, screening for oral cancer, executing head and neck and soft tissue exams, offering treatment options for periodontal disease, educating the patient on periodontal health, removing stain and supragingival and subgingival calculus, performing prophylaxis, instructing the patient on oral hygiene, confirming the doctor's treatment recommendations, generally promoting the doctor and team, motivating the patient to return for treatment, and escorting the patient to the appointment coordinator or even scheduling the next appointment. If a doctor treats a hygienist as someone who merely cleans teeth—as a sort of housekeeper of the mouth—that is all the doctor should expect to get. Respect for the position and clear communication of all duties associated with it will produce results.

Good hygienists do so much more than clean teeth. These professionals promote oral health and build solid patient/practice relationships, the kind of relationships that keep patients returning. I have clients who rarely have to sell a Smile Makeover because the hygienist has done this before the doctor even enters the room. The patient is anxious as to the possibility, and all the doctor has to do is confirm the necessity. Communicating the value of oral health and the urgency of treatment is a team effort.

That includes the front desk. In addition to reworking the hygienist's job description, subtle changes in the tone of scheduling and confirmation systems can encourage a patient's return for routine cleaning appointments. Many doctors still call Non-surgical Periodontal Therapy "Deep Cleanings?" It's no wonder patients cancel appointments for their Deep Cleaning; it sounds like something you do to an oven, if you get around to it. Everyone must create value and communicate urgency.

This message has to be reinforced once the patient is out of the chair, even once the patient is out the door. An often overlooked opportunity to create value is the message placed on each continued care card. This card must do more than encourage the patient to return for “just a cleaning.” If you do not create value, then you cannot expect the patient to value oral health. Remove requests for a “24” or “48 hour cancellation notice.” Such language encourages cancellations, since the patient knows s/he needs only to call within the time frame. Try using the following:

Continued Care

At your request, we have reserved an appointment with your preferred hygienist for your professional preventative cleaning and evaluation on (date) at (time). Please call today to let us know that you received this postcard. We look forward to you at the time dedicated especially for you.

At your request, we have reserved an appointment with your preferred hygienist for your periodontal evaluation and recommended follow up procedures. On (date) at (time). Please call today to let us know that you received this postcard. We look forward to you at the time dedicated especially for you.

Hygiene Continued Care Recall

Please call today to reserve an appointment with your preferred hygienist for your professional preventative cleaning and evaluation. We look forward to seeing you for the protection of an important asset: your smile and oral health. Remember that preventive care helps you avoid unnecessary time and expense.

Please call today to reserve an appointment with your preferred hygienist for your periodontal evaluation and recommended follow up procedures. We look forward to seeing you for the protection of an important asset: your smile and oral health. Remember that preventive care helps you avoid unnecessary time and expense.

In addition, I advise my clients to preschedule the next appointment and have the patient self-address the confirmation card before s/he leaves. (Computer generated cards and labels are often overlooked with the junk mail). I recommend filing the cards by month due, and then further categorizing each month by weekly schedule. Continued care cards should be mailed weekly at least three weeks prior to the appointment and followed by a call 48 hours before the appointment.

This call is another opportunity. When calling patients to confirm appointments, the script that I find most effective is: “Good morning Mrs. Smith, this is Kathleen from Dr. Caring’s office. Mary (hygienist) asked me to call and let you know that she is looking forward to seeing you on Friday at 8:00 am. for your recommended periodontal maintenance follow up.” Offices that call to “confirm” give the patient one last chance to cancel.

I find in my initial interviews with many doctors that they don’t even know what they expect; they only know they want *more* from their hygiene departments. I always have to ask, “When you interviewed hygienists, did you make the job expectations clear? Did

you explain your Non-surgical periodontal program? Do you have one?" It is easy to point fingers at the hygiene department, but such negative energy doesn't solve the problem. Doctors can and should set high profit/efficiency goals for their hygienists. But the doctors must be willing to re-evaluate their own behavior and must be able to clearly articulate what exactly they expect from the hygienists. Likely, creating a profitable hygiene department means re-evaluating the messages the entire staff is sending, perhaps even subconsciously, to each patient.

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