

PATIENT MANAGEMENT

A hands-on approach to collaboration and commitment.

by AMY MORGAN, CEO OF THE PRIDE INSTITUTE



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Everyone in a dental practice has an opinion about patient management. To some it's as simple as, "Should I charge a patient who no-shows or cancels?" or as complex as, "How do I truly inspire patients to partner with us in their quest for long-term health and well being?"

Everyone can agree the most important outcomes of well-managed patient relationships include:

- Value, trust and commitment
- Accountability and responsibility
- Raving fans
- Loyal ambassadors
- Partners in long-term oral health

But how do you get there? There are many books, articles, DVDs and webinars out there to address this question. With so much information available, it's easy to get overwhelmed and do nothing. I would say if your patients continuously decline treatment or are not cooperative in their commitments to the practice, then congratulations, you have patient management issues! This is good news, because there are things you and your team can do to get a more desirable result.

What's your focus?

Communication has become so instantaneous that people are losing the opportunity for intimacy and customization. This same problem has always plagued the old school "medical model" where patients were expected to

remain silent, while the expert in the white coat told them what they needed (and the expectation was the patient would obey, no questions asked).

As a practice begins to define what it wants its patient management system to look like, it is vital to make some initial decisions. Will it align with the medical model, which we call an Occupational Focus? Or will it be a holistic, collaborative model, which we call a Professional Focus? The Professional Focus is designed to achieve the intimacy everyone is missing in today's communication and therefore is the model we would like to see more and more practices move toward.

What's the difference between these approaches? To begin, an Occupational Focus is disease oriented while a Professional Focus is health oriented. A conversation that is disease focused sounds like, "You have 4 mm pockets and bleeding when you brush, which is evidence of periodontal disease." The same conversation when health oriented would sound like, "To maintain healthy teeth and gums, we want to see less than 3 mm pockets and no bleeding while brushing. This can be accomplished with aggressive periodontal therapy."

It may seem like a minor change in communication, but for many patients the mere men-

tion of disease can be perceived as a negative.

In the occupational model, most communication is centered on telling the patient what to do: "You need to floss." But the professional model is focused on guiding patients and encouraging active participation: "Tell me how your home oral health care is going and how can I help you become even more successful?"

Language skills

The language in each model is completely different. You will easily notice you are dealing with an occupational practice when you hear things like: cleaning, exam, treatment consultation, recall. You can discern a professional practice when you hear things like: comprehensive evaluation, treatment conference, prophylaxis, continuing care.

The point of all this is that if you choose the traditional occupational focus you will get a compliant patient who says, "I will" and then—when there are obstacles—won't. Using the professional focus, you will get a committed patient who says, "I want" and then does everything possible to follow through.

It's about control

If you deal with no-shows, patients refusing ideal care or failing to follow through on

financial arrangements, it's a sign these patients are trained in the old school model and feel out of control. Known passive aggressive ways to take control back from the dental team are to not show up for an appointment or to not pay bills in a timely manner.

You can charge for a cancellation or create policies regarding financial arrangements, but with an uncommitted patient, these reactive efforts will come too late. When you have a relationship based on mutual trust, even if these issues arise, good communication and objection handling skills will solve them easily.

Be flexible

It is important to recognize that even committed patients have faced obstacles in maintaining their ideal health during this economic slump. Practices that exhibit flexibility in treatment, scheduling and finances to help accommodate patients' challenges have maintained their productivity and profitability during this tough time.

If you create patient management systems that are flexible during these trying times, you'll have even greater success in the future. The ultimate goal is to create protocols and processes that create value, collaboration, trust and true commitment. That is what ideal patient management is all about. ●

Do you have a question for Amy Morgan, CEO of The Pride Institute? She and the Pride team are eager to help you find answers. Please submit any practice management inquiries via e-mail to tcarter@advanstar.com.



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