Why Practice Management?

By Dr. Ehab Heikal, Egypt

Historically, dentistry has been a closely regulated field in terms of management, marketing and business ethics. Dentists were educated to achieve one goal—clinical excellence. The notion of marketing a clinic, setting services or even discussing ideal business models and profitability simply were not (and in the majority of Universities, is still) part of the curriculum, as some dentists felt these concepts somehow detracted from the professionalism of the industry.

As a dentist, I understand and appreciate that some dentists find a focus on dental management, marketing or business efficiency to be contrary to achieving clinical excellence. However, in today’s world, I believe clinical excellence and an efficiently operated business only complement rather than contradict one another.

Practice management and quality of patient care

One point of view to consider is that failing to operate a clinic efficiently or not consistently providing outstanding customer service can detract from a dentist’s ability to provide excellent clinical care and a positive patient experience.

A clinic that is disorganized or chaotic, for example, does not provide efficient or not consistently provide excellent clinical care and a positive patient experience.

Clinics that lack a sufficient profit margin will be unable to invest in new technologies, invest in continuing education or use the best products and materials. Dental clinics, like hospitals, are faced with the ever-increasing cost of technology. The addition of items such as practice management software and digital radiography systems require certain levels of cash flow and profitability be maintained to afford a technology investment. In time, a clinic that does not invest in new technologies, materials and services fails to offer its patients the highest level of care.

Inefficiencies in a clinic can be compounded by the fact that approximately 5 percent of patients are no-shows or last-minute cancellations each year. Close to 30 percent of patients are overdue for periodontal maintenance (Not mentioning oral cancer screenings that is rarely done, if ever done!). These numbers only illustrate further why clinics must have systems in place to provide comprehensive diagnosis and treatment to all patients, as well as effective care for overall excellence in oral health treatment.

What these examples also indicate is that efficient management systems and follow-up procedures allow practices to track and interact better with patients, ultimately providing these patients with the opportunity for excellence in dentistry. The goal of efficient dental management is to help dentists and their staff teams achieve their personal and professional goals by providing a solid business foundation from which to grow. This does not detract from, but rather enhances, clinical care.

But, does implementing Practice Management make us focus only on profits and the money side of our clinic? Does it mean that efficient management systems into the management of all subjects, and only one of these is practice profitability? A comprehensive practice management program also must consider the enjoyment of the dentist, satisfaction and training of the staff, level of stress in the clinic, investment in clinic upgrades, cash flow to move to expand an office if necessary, efficiency in record keeping, patient flow and scheduling, proper care of emergency patients, patient financial arrangements, treatment, presentation and case acceptance, technology investments, continuing education and more.

But those who lump critical practice management issues into one category and proclaim they detract from clinical care rather than enhance it misunderstand the very purpose of better practice management excellence in all areas of the practice.

Efficient practice management is about much more than profitability. It is about educating and motivating patients to achieve optimum oral health by incorporating the best business methodologies and systems into the management of all clinic operations.

Effective practice management cannot be accomplished without gaining the overwhelming satisfaction and trust of every patient. This can be achieved only through excellence of care and by achieving the high professional standards that dentistry currently demands.

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Balancing quality care and ethics

In no way am I suggesting that a total focus on money at the expense of the best interests of patients is the proper way to practice dentistry. Practice management is a very broad field that covers hundreds of different subjects, and only one of these is practice profitability. A comprehensive practice management program also must consider the enjoyment of the dentist, satisfaction and training of the staff, level of stress in the clinic, investment in clinic upgrades, cash flow to move to expand an office if necessary, efficiency in record keeping, patient flow and scheduling, proper care of emergency patients, patient financial arrangements, treatment, presentation and case acceptance, technology investments, continuing education and more.

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