The power of cross coding: How hygienists can support their patients’ overall body health

By Marianne Harper

Have you lost the excitement? Are you content with what you might now perceive as the same-old, same-old every day? Day after day you may be performing hygiene procedures over and over again, all the while knowing you are helping your patients but perhaps you simply don’t feel as though you are truly making a significant difference in their overall health. If you feel that level of frustration, or even if you don’t, but you are interested in advancing your career, then read on to discover some ways in which you can make a significant difference in the health of your patients.

As you are aware, dentistry is becoming recognized as a medical discipline. We in the dental field are in a unique position to support our patients’ overall body health. Our patients who maintain their regular recare schedules are quite probably seen by us more frequently than they are seen by their primary care providers. “Around 59 percent of adults see their physicians in a year while 64 percent see their dentists, which means we see 25 percent more patients than they do.”

Hygienists can be key players in this opportunity. By thoroughly questioning their new patients and by providing and reviewing medical history forms that are updated with the most current medical questions, hygienists can begin an evaluation of their patients’ medical history. When a patient presents for their last appointment, so a recare update form is an efficient way to inquire about their health. If your practice is not familiar with recare update forms, please check my website to obtain a copy.

Again, thorough questioning of all new and established patients is an essential component to getting the full picture of your patients’ health.

What is discovered from these questions can be a strong determining factor in how each patient is handled. Patient questioning should always be followed by dental exams, X-rays, blood pressure checks and clinical observations. For those patients who may have a systemic disorder, your practice should become proactive by referring the patient back to his or her primary care provider.

However, because dentistry has evolved over the last decade, there are more ways that the dental practice can help make these determinations. With the frequency of patients’ visits and the availability of numerous cutting edge diagnostic tools, we have the unique opportunity to administer different types of disease testing that, in the past, were performed only by medical practices.

If you are unfamiliar with the types of medical testing that are available for dental practices to perform, then the following information can make a big difference in the quality of your practice’s treatment, and it may help to make a significant change in how you perceive your career.

First of all, periodontal diseases and other conditions that are apparent.

What are apparent.

DNA for the presence of pathogens or their byproducts

DNA for the presence of specific pathogens or for patient susceptibility to periodontal disease

TOPS for inflammatory markers

Oral HPV testing

Diabetes testing with a glucometer – finger stick or blood sample taken from a periodontal pocket

Oral cancer screening (e.g. ViziLite)

HIV testing

Screening for cardiovascular disease (e.g. HeartScore System)

Saliva biomarker test – measures three specific biomarkers that play a role in cancer development in the oral cavity

As you can see, these tests cover many possible systemic conditions. Your practice will have to determine which staff members are allowed to administer these tests, because your state makes regulations controlling this. Hygienists may be allowed and, if so, this may make a difference in your career. Even in states where hygienists are not allowed per your state’s regulations regulations, you may be able to incorporate some of these tests in your practice to help you determine which conditions that need to be tested for.

There is, however, another area in which hygienists can make a significant difference in their practices. Dental-medical cross coding.

Tests that can be performed in a dental practice:

• C-Reactive protein (CRP) for inflammation
• BANA for bacterial pathogens or their byproducts
• DNA for the presence of specific pathogens or for patient susceptibility to periodontal disease

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Fig. 1 Photocopy of example CMS-1500 health insurance claim for treatment of sleep apnea, considered a medically necessary dental procedure that qualifies for coverage through health insurance. Many other dental procedures and tests also might qualify. But you need to know the diagnosis and procedure codes – and other nuances of the process.
coding is a cutting edge insurance system whereby dental practices can file a patient's medically necessary dental procedures with their medical plans. Implementing cross coding creates greater case acceptance resulting in increased patient affordability and practice profitability. Hygienists can play a key role in the implementation of cross coding. Hygienists can be the communicators for cross coding in their practices by alerting the practice of patients whom they believe are medically compromised. Such patients can be the communicators for cross coding. 

As an example, hygienists can inquire about conditions that might indicate that a patient has sleep apnea (Fig. 1). For those practices that treat sleep apnea, the practice would then need to refer the patient for a sleep study before commencing treatment. If the practice does not treat sleep apnea, this referral might indicate that a patient has medically necessary dental procedures with their medical insurance carriers will begin to see the necessity for including these types of procedures in their plans. The full scope of cross coding is much more extensive than just these tests. Dental practices should be cross coding for the following:

- Trauma procedures
- Oral surgical procedures
- TMD procedures
- Sleep apnea procedures
- Medically necessary endodontic procedures
- Medically necessary implant and periodontal procedures
- Exams, radiographs and diagnostic procedures for any medically necessary dental procedure

Between implementing disease testing and cross coding, a hygienist will significantly make positive changes to his or her care. These changes will not only help patients obtain optimal health, but they can also help make procedures more affordable. Patients will be able to see their dental practice truly cares about their health and provide more confidence in the practice. This is a true win-win situation. The dental practice will value the contributions of these hygienists, and hygienists will rarely face each day with that “same-old, same-old” feeling.