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 managing a clinic, selling services or even discussing ideal business models and profitability simply were not 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 excellent clinical care and a positive patient experience. A clinic that is disorganized or chaotic, for example, does not provide proper focus on the patient. A dentist who is constantly interrupted to provide excellent clinical care and cannot completely concentrate on patient care. Inefficiencies in a clinic will lead to scheduling confusion, which often causes chaos, rushing and frustration for the doctor and patient. I believe clinical excellence and an efficiently operated business only complement rather than contradict one another.

Clinics operating in a fast-paced, disorganized environment often fail to provide patients with a comprehensive oral examination. In many instances, the dentist spends less than five minutes examining a patient, and the focus is on identifying active caries, soft-tissue disease or restorative work that is obvious and in need of repair. Rarely in this disorganized environment does time allow the dentist to focus on reaching optimal oral health through innovative and comprehensive clinical and elective services.

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 rather than enhance it misinterprets 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.

Clinics that lack a sufficient profit margin will be unable to invest in new technologies, invest in continually educating 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 that 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 will fail to offer its patients the highest level of care.

Inefficiencies in a clinic are 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.

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 broad field that covers hundreds of different subjects, and 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 or 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.

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Balancing quality care and ethics

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