Dental Informatics: the right time to invest in training and research?

By Titus Schleyer, DMD, PhD

These days, technology appears to touch most aspects of our lives, and dentistry is no exception. The plethora of possibilities and questions is seemingly endless.

Should you invest in chairside computers, paperless records and/or digital radiology? Does it make sense for patients to have Web-based access to their appointments and dental record information? What is Health Information Technology (HIT) and what are the implications for your practice? Can computers really make you a better dentist and help improve patient care?

The last question is one worth pondering. If we look at all investments in our practices, we make them in two major ways: to improve patient care and outcomes, enhance efficiency, or both. Health information technology (HIT) is no different. One issue with HIT, however, is that it is often hard to gauge the true balance between costs and benefits.

Evidence for the benefits of information technology (IT) in dentistry can be found, but it is largely anecdotal. Practitioners report easy and nearly ubiquitous access to patient information. Electronic reports allow tracking of patient completion of treatment plans and even health outcomes. Digital information can be e-mailed and shared with patients and colleagues, for instance, to increase patient compliance or to get payment in the mail to us when you get home, we would greatly appreciate it.

Financial negotiations should be delegated to a trained financial coordinator. The dentist is the clinician, the primary income producer and the chief executive officer. However, he/she is not the financial coordinator, and engaging in this role is often both inefficient and awkward for dentist and patient alike. It also can undermine the profitability of the practice.

Delegate financial discussions to the trained members of the team. Those individuals most capable of succeeding in this position are typically assertive, tactful, confident and goal-oriented. You may have excellent members of your team who are loyal, kind and truly dedicated to your practice. However, they may be entirely too passive or very uncomfortable asking patients for payment. It is not a job that just anyone can step into.

Some people are simply not suited for this responsibility. Pay attention to the personality type of the individual responsible for collections and secure training to ensure maximum success.

From time to time, as the dentist, you will feel that certain exceptions should be made to the policy for specific cases. Certainly, as the business owner, that is your prerogative. However, be judicious in making those exceptions. Special arrangements that become common practice using the role of the financial coordinator and can quickly render financial policy useless.

Educate patients fully so that they understand informatics, are their collective research activity is not intensive enough to address the pressing opportunities and challenges in leveraging IT for dental practices. For many years, the training program at the University of Pittsburgh has been preparing individuals for research and teaching careers in dental informatics. But, we produce a trickle where a flood would be needed.

Through the generous support of the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), we can provide dental informatics training essentially for free to qualified applicants. NIDCR funds provide a stipend, tuition, fees and health insurance support, travel subsidies and a state-of-the-art computer.

Free training in dental informatics

The National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), funds dental informatics training to qualified applicants for free (no kidding!). The NIDCR funds provide a stipend, tuition, fees and health insurance support, travel subsidies and a state-of-the-art computer.

These positions are highly sought after and admission is very competitive. Additional information about the program is available at di.dental.pitt.edu/postgrad.php.

For any questions, please contact the program director, Dr. Titus Schleyer, at titus@pitt.edu.