Welcoming new patients

It’s essential that your receptionist is highly skilled at nurturing new patients. It will make their experience worthwhile and they’ll want to return to your practice, says Sharon Holmes.

It takes the whole team to make a new patient feel at home, but most of the time, it’s the receptionist who will at first influence a new patient’s opinion of a practice. I always refer to the reception as the navel centre of the practice. Should this centre be weak, its effects can overflow onto the financial aspect of the business and affect the practice in a very negative way.

Choosing your receptionist

Your choice of who to place in your reception area needs be based on key skills such as: people skills, approachability, maturity and a financial understanding of what makes a business do well. This is a large package to fill, but so important. By overlooking the obvious simply because the person you have on your desk is reliable, does not mean they are the correct person to be there. Making changes for the right reasons can be uncomfortable for the principal dentist, but right for the patients.

I have experienced this kind of situation so many times which has lead to serious issues with regards to patient complaints due to poor customer care. Very rarely do the patients complain about clinical work, but more about poor communication from both reception and dentists.

From the moment a new patient phones the practice to book an appointment to the end of the phone call, they can tell what kind of relationship they are going to have with the practice. Even if the first call was poorly handled, the patient may come in anyway, due to location and time availability. From my experience, this patient is a complaint waiting to happen and expects their whole experience to be a difficult one.

A happy new patient

When the call comes in, what the patient should hear on the other end is a clear, concise friendly voice which is warm and welcoming. The call should also be answered within three rings.

The receptionist should know the dentist’s availability for appointments, the treatments that are carried out and the costs. When this is achieved, I can assure you, you are going to have a happy new patient who has already started to build a relationship with the practice through reception.

When the new patient arrives at the practice, the receptionist should know the new patient is due and note his or her name so that on entering reception the patient is greeted on a personal level by surname the receptionist introduces the patient to follow them through to the surgery where she then introduces the patient to the dentist. Once the dentist carries out a thorough examination and uses all the tools possible such as intra-oral cameras, x-rays, educational charts and finally a treatment plan that explains all costs, the patient will walk away feeling that they have been well cared for and fully informed. Working in private practice, this is always achievable. Working in NHS it is far more stressful and time pressured, but each member of any dental practice should make the effort to make all patients feel welcome and cared for. Patients do value the staff that take care of them.

A friendly voice

The next important step is the one carried out by the nurse who is going to meet the patient in reception. The nurse must make sure she calls the patient’s name out just as clearly and in a friendly inviting voice. The nurse should introduce herself by name and invite the patient to follow them through to the surgery where she then introduces the patient to the dentist. Once the dentist carries out a thorough examination and uses all the tools possible such as intra-oral cameras, x-rays, educational charts and finally a treatment plan that explains all costs, the patient will walk away feeling that they have been well cared for and fully informed. Working in private practice, this is always achievable. Working in NHS it is far more stressful and time pressured, but each member of any dental practice should make the effort to make all patients feel welcome and cared for. Patients do value the staff that take care of them.

About the author

Sharon Holmes

Originally from South Africa, Sharon Holmes moved to the UK in 2002. She thoroughly enjoys her position as business development manager at the Dental Arts Studio and her role in the dental industry, which has moulded her into a winner in her field. She believes that her position is based on common sense.