How busy is your hygienist book?

Sheila Scott offers eight immediate ways to transform your hygienist’s appointment book

Could your hygiene book be busier? Are you seeing an increase in cancelled hygienist appointments or failed attempts to attend? If you can relate to either of these two questions, the advice in this article could help you to (re)build your hygiene service and ensure greater patient health and practice stability.

I believe the ideal private, preventively orientated general practice should be keeping a hygienist busy for four out of every five days of general dentistry availability. Here are my eight immediate recommendations for transforming your hygiene appointment book.

1. Communicate the benefits

Do communicate the benefits of hygiene visits to every patient because you see for a regular exam. It is not enough to suggest patients see your hygienist for a ‘scale and polish’ or a ‘cleaning’ as this does not adequately explain why the appointment is necessary. It is also misleading and unhelpful to indicate that the hygiene appointment is for a ‘clean’ – after all, patients believe they can do this for themselves.

By far the most important part of the hygiene appointment for most patients will be in helping them develop skills and habits that will reduce their chances of developing gum disease, tooth decay, heart disease, etc. and I believe it’s the job of dentists and hygienists to communicate this information every time they see a patient.

It doesn’t have to be complicated, your message could be: ‘You do have signs of damage in your mouth from bacterial plaque. I recommend you see Natalie, our hygienist, for regular appointments to help you work on the skills you need to control this plaque damage at home - this will help you stay dentally healthy and reduce your chances of developing dental problems later.’

2. A consistent message

Please don’t change your communication of what your focus is without letting your whole team know, particularly your hygienist. Ideally, call a team meeting to discuss how your hygienist helps periodontally compromised patients in their appointments, and fine tune your communications to reflect the actual pattern of advice given in the appointments.

3. Involve reception

Make sure your reception team has some good verbal ammunition for discussing the impact of broken, cancelled or failed hygiene appointments with patients. It’s not good for your patients or your professional standing to just let your patients cancel their appointments or fail to book them.

Your receptionist should have your blessing to tell patients that hygiene appointments can be more important for some patients than their dental visits - because hygienists help patients prevent dental problems - which might reduce their risks for treatment in the future. For example, if a dentist has recommended a hygiene visit then the receptionist can suggest to the patient that they would benefit from some help in either treating gum problems or preventing them.

4. Stock what’s recommended

If your hygienist recommends a patient uses a certain brush, paste, mouthwash, floss or colutorial interdental aid, please make sure you stock these. It doesn’t matter if the local shops sell your preferred electric toothbrushes for less than you buy them for (in which case I’d suggest going to the shop and buying a doz or more and sell them for the same price). You should be stockc recommended items as a service to patients - because you care that they use the right tools for controlling the factors that damage teeth, gums and heart health.

Every hygienist and oral health educator knows that if a patient can buy the recommended item just after the discussions held, they are more likely to start using them at home, than if they have to wait a day or two until they’re in the vicinity of a certain chain of shops - who knows if they’ll really buy their suggested toothbrush then?

5. Hygiene & cosmetic dentistry

If you’re a provider of regular crown and bridgework, or cosmetic dental work, it is in the cost of a hygiene visit to each course of treatment and offer a ‘free hygiene visit after the treatment. For example: ‘Now you’ve spent this money on your treatment, Mrs. X, I’d like you to see our hygienist so that she can show you how to look after it in the best possible way, if we can help you keep this new tooth free of plaque, it should last much longer and your mouth will be healthier in the long term’.

6. Focus on children

Why not develop a programme for all children in the practice, where they see your hygienist for a ‘family skills and habits’ appointment at least once a year – perhaps in the holidays? Full-priced hygiene appointments can be immensely valuable - and great fun for competing siblings, if the focus is on who is best at removing every last bit of (disclosed) plaque. In addition, a parent should be encouraged to supervise and coach each one to do this well at home.

7. Work as a team

Make sure dentists and hygienists ‘huddle’ together to discuss individual patients, their suggested patterns of hygiene appointments, response and any changes to advice or treatment etc. Don’t let your hygienist work in isolation. Improving patients’ dental health is a team game and the game needs the whole team to play actively.

8. Involve your hygienist

Finally, include your hygienist in all practice meetings. Tell them they are an integral part of the team and their involvement is immensely valuable – and great fun for competing siblings, if the focus is on who is best at removing every last bit of (disclosed) plaque. In addition, a parent should be encouraged to supervise and coach each one to do this well at home.

Practices can organise for almost all patients to benefit from hygiene visits and increase profit while doing so; however, the game requires focus and good communication with patients.

* Data from patient questionnaires provided by Sheila Scott