Dentist, Mr. Jackson, cancelled his two-hour crown and bridge appointment. In one simple sentence there goes your production for the day, swallowed into that now gaping hole in your schedule. Every dentist in every practice experiences the seemingly endless frustrations associated with patient cancellations and no-shows. The cash outlay is significant as broken appointments cost practices some £20,000–£50,000 every year.

And that doesn’t begin to count the thousands of pounds lost in production that the doctor never has the opportunity to diagnose, much less deliver.

While dental offices typically point the finger at the front desk to maintain a full schedule, clinical teams often overlook their indispensable role in ensuring patients keep appointments. In truth, curbing cancellations and no-shows begins chairside.

It is essential that clinical teams emphasise the value of the dental care provided during even the most regular dental visit as well as clearly explain to patients the importance of keeping their appointments.

Ironically, dentists frequently overlook the significant influence that they have on the patient’s perception of routine dental care. In a rush to return to their own patient, they often unwittingly minimise the value of the professional hygiene appointment.

Consider this common scenario: The hygienist spends time explaining to Mrs. Patient that she is now showing signs of periodontal disease and may require more frequent oral hygiene appointments. The patient is concerned and is prepared to schedule oral hygiene visits once every four months. Then the doctor walks in to check Mrs. Patient. He greets her and marvels at the great job she is doing with her oral healthcare. The dentist has un-intentionally given Mrs. Patient justification for skipping her next oral hygiene appointment.

First and foremost, the clinical team has to be on the same page. This situation is easily addressed if the hygienist takes just a moment to explain to the doctor what has been found and subsequently discussed with that patient. It is a simple solution, but it underscores the importance of the clinical team’s role in emphasising the value of ongoing dental care.

Be patient with your patients. They do not set out to create havoc or disruption in your day. They too are very busy and often when something has to give in their demanding lives, it is the dental appointment. However, educating them on the practice’s policies and expectations for appointments is an essential step every practice can take in controlling cancellations and no-shows.

Make it personal

Confirmation calls are a must for every appointment scheduled. They should be made to patients 48 hours in advance of their appointments. Practices that achieve the greatest success in curtailing cancellations and no-shows are willing to adjust the scheduling coordinator’s work hours somewhat so that she can make the necessary calls during times that patients are most likely to be reached, such as in the evenings.

The objective of the confirmation call is to speak directly to the patient. This requires far more effort than just leaving a message on someone’s machine or with another household member.

Use a positive and pleasant tone when confirming appointments. Keep notes of the patient’s personal record regarding a particular area of concern, and reinforce the need for the treatment, based on the patient information in the chart. For example, ‘Mrs. Smith, I know Dr. Jones wants to keep an eye on that tooth on the upper left side.’ This will personalise the call for the patient, and it impresses upon them both the need for the appointment as well as the fact that your practice is truly attentive.

Fill cancellations fast

A computerised scheduling system is essential if the practice seeks to fill cancellations quickly and efficiently as well as competently manage the schedule as a whole. The computer enables practices to maintain a list of those patients interested in coming in sooner for their appointments. When a patient cancels, the scheduling program retains the appointment information and scans the available patient data base to fill unexpected openings.

Cancellations and no-shows are a reflection of our hurried and overextended culture. It is a problem that affects those practices serving patients with a lower dental IQ as well as those serving the busy, well-educated executives. Although they cannot be eliminated completely, with a clear and direct approach cancellations and no-shows can be minimised significantly in your practice.

Make it standard operating procedure to follow-up with every patient who cancels, doesn’t show or doesn’t reschedule. Contact ‘no-shows’ within 10 minutes of their appointment time and express genuine concern for their absence. For example, ‘Mr. Clemmons, this is Dr. Denny’s office. We were expecting you for a 5 p.m. appointment today and were concerned when you didn’t arrive. Is everything okay?’

After two ‘no-shows’ the patient’s record should be tagged indicating that they are unreliable. Politely inform the patient you will contact them when an opening is available.

If patients are canceling frequently because of daytime work and family responsibilities, it may be time to seriously consider offering a limited number of appointments in the evening and/or on weekends.