Curb cancellations and no-shows from back to front

Doctor, Mr. Jackson just canceled his two-hour crown and bridge appointment. In one simple sentence there goes your production for the day, swal-lowed 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 di-agnose, much less deliver.

While dental offices typically point the finger at the front desk to maintain a full schedule, clinical teams often overlook their indispensible role in urging patients to keep appointments. In actuality, 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 un-wittingly 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 doctor has un-intentionally given Mrs. Patient justification for skipping her next oral hygiene appointment.

First and foremost, the clinical team has to tie to the same page. This situation is easily ad-dressed 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 im-portance 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 ap-pointments is an essential step every practice can take in con-trolling 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 ad-vance of their appointments. Practices that achieve the greatest success in curtailing cancellations and no-shows are willing to adjust the scheduling coordi-nator’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 appoint-ments. Keep news in the pa-tient’s personal record regard-ing a particular area of concern, and reinforce the need for the treatment, based on the patient information in the chart. For ex-ample, ‘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 atten-tive.

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 sched-ule as a whole. The computer enables practices to maintain a list of those patients interested in coming in sooner for their ap-pointments. When a patient can-cels, the scheduling program re-tains the appointment informa-tion and scans the available pa-tient data base to fill unexpected openings.

Contact ‘no-shows’ within 24 hours of their appointment time.

Educate your patients

Oftentimes, patients have no comprehension of the turbu-lence that their ‘little’ cancella-tion or no-show can cause you and your team. In fact, it has been estimated that more than a quar-ter of your patients, about 28 per-cent, routinely cancel appoint-ments largely because practices are not actively educating pa-tients on the importance of keep-ing them.

I recommend that practices take specific, concrete meas-ures to reclaim control of their schedules. The first step is to es-tablish accountability. Assign a specific person to be responsi-ble for ensuring that openings are filled promptly, appoint-ments are confirmed 48-hours in advance and daily produc-tion goals are met. In addition, develop a clearly articulated policy regarding broken ap-pointments. The policy should be specific and appropriate in tone, it also should be period-ically distributed to all patients, especially new patients. And each time an appointment is scheduled the policy should be politely reiterated to the pa-tient.

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

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