Streamlining operations
Jo Banks discusses how to simplify the day-to-day running of your practice and ensure your appointment systems are working smoothly

Used correctly, the appointment book can be the practice team’s greatest ally. Not only can it that the reception room does not become a waiting room, but it is also the cornerstone of a smooth-running practice.

However, the appointment book is also one of the tools we use day-to-day without really utilising it effectively and it is easy to take it for granted. By following the top tips below, you can get your appointment system working seamlessly and ensure that you are taking full advantage of this valuable tool.

Manage new patients
It is important to make sure every new patient feels valued, as choosing a dentist is a significant decision and requires a feeling of trust in both the dentist and the practice. Therefore, when a new patient contacts the practice by telephone to make an appointment - why not send them a practice information leaflet, directions to the practice and a medical history questionnaire, together with their appointment card? By doing this you are not only reminding the patient of their appointment, but you are also reducing the time they have to wait in reception by saving them completing any forms when they arrive.

Book at short notice
If a patient calls for an appointment which is not available, you could ask them if they would like to be notified of any cancellations. By retaining and using an up-to-date list of patients who are willing to attend at short notice you can help ensure that cancelled appointments are filled and the appointment list is used efficiently.

It is also a great idea to give patients a courtesy call around one to two days before their appointment. This not only reminds the patient of their appointment, but it is also a great time-saving method for the practice as it helps to keep the appointment list up-to-date, with more opportunities to fill cancellations and shorthanded notes.

Name names
Another way of making patients feel relaxed and appreciated is to ensure that they know which member of the team they will be seeing at each appointment. If your patient visits a particular dentist regularly, be sure to let them know, before their appointment, if their dentist is unable to see them, and the name of the replacement dentist who is seeing them.

This is particularly important for nervous patients, as they may have built up a level of trust with their regular dentist and may not feel comfortable seeing anyone else. If you leave it until they arrive to record the relevant details, such as the date, time and who they will be seeing at their appointment, in their diaries. This not only reduces the risk of missed appointments but also provides them the opportunity to explain any problems or concerns, which will put them at their ease and also help the dentist.

Be clear on charges
Appointment time is precious in any practice, so it is essential to make sure patients, especially new ones, understand their ease and also help the dentist.

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Other options include a patient newsletter or adding this information to your practice website.

Keep it legible
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A lot of practices are now computerised, so why not promote the benefits of computerised appointment books? This will be an effective solution if you have trouble reading other team members’ handwriting, or even if you just want to make your appointment book more secure. Though this may reduce illegibility issues, you will still need to be clear about abbreviations, not your own version of shorthand, to ensure that entries can be understood by everyone.

An effective management tool is to see nervous patients first thing in the morning before the practice gets too busy, in order to reduce their anxiety and reduce the risk of them having to wait. You could also aim to see them at the end of the day so that they do not have to have time out of school. And, mixing them with your more nervous patients could release the potential for anxiety in both parties.

Children’s days
Many practices have found it really useful to clear a day in the appointment book in the school holidays and have a children’s day. You can provide fun activities such as face painting and use the opportunity to educate children on how to brush their teeth and what foods they should avoid. It also works well if the dentist spends the whole day doing examinations only, book future appointments should a child require further treatment. This is an excellent way of seeing your children in one block, encouraging more regular check-ups and reducing the fear factor for children who may see the dentist as a scary place!

These tips are designed to give you a starting point, but if you wish to learn more about how you can streamline the running of your practice there are a number of handbooks and guides available, which can even be personalised to suit your particular practice’s needs.

Alternatively, why not look into attending a training course to target any areas of improvement? Some dental payment plan specialists not only offer a range of structured training courses, but can also provide bespoke training for your practice to take place at a venue that suits you.