

Working With Dental Staff to Improve Patient Safety and Experience

Dental staff play an essential role in patient safety, adherence, and satisfaction as they interact with patients every day. However, they also can be part of interactions that result in errors, misunderstandings, and patient complaints/dissatisfaction, which may adversely affect the patient experience.

To minimize these unfortunate situations, dentists need to provide their staff members with assistance, training, and strategies to help them feel empowered to optimize their patient

interactions. Well-trained staff members also will likely feel more confident and comfortable in handling their day-to-day interactions with patients and their families.

The following strategies can help dentists better collaborate with their staff members. By informing patients about various policies and ensuring staff members follow established protocols, dental practices can reinforce a consistent and quality approach to care and minimize any potential liability exposure.

1

Develop office policies and procedures that clearly define the practice's approach to important patient situations, such as missed appointments, nonadherence to home treatment protocols and medication orders, and refusal to see consultants/specialists.

2

Create a policy that addresses unacceptable behaviors from patients/families. Include inappropriate waiting room behavior in that policy — e.g., physical and verbal abuse and roughhousing — as it can compromise employee and patient safety.

3

Encourage staff members to discuss difficult patient situations. It's also advantageous to practice challenging patient interactions with staff members to give them more confidence. Then, when a problem arises, the dentist and staff member can discuss office policies and specific dental issues with the patient to reach a resolution.

4

Provide staff members with scripted remarks to use with patients and pediatric patients' parents in case they display unacceptable behavior in the dental office. Scripted remarks should focus on patient safety and avoid embarrassing the patient or parent.

5

Work with staff members to inappropriate behavior early. For example, if a pediatric patient's parent does not intervene at the first signs of a child's disruptive behavior, a staff member should step in. When unacceptable behavior is corrected, staff should acknowledge and commend the individual(s).

6

Coach staff members on emphasizing the importance the practice places on complying with federal, state, and local regulations, particularly if patients voice frustration about completing various forms or paperwork.

7

Ensure staff members are trained to explain and reinforce the value of X-rays and other treatments as an integral part of the dental standard of care.

8

Advise staff members to always focus on what is best for the patient when responding to a negative situation so it can lead to better patient understanding.

9

Ask staff members to share any important observations during staff meetings since they play a key role in identifying (a) incorrect assumptions, (b) misunderstandings, (c) unrealistic expectations, (d) refusal to acknowledge boundaries, and (e) clinical nonadherence. Then together the team can discuss and decide on methods to address these situations.

10

Consider offering training programs to staff members related to customer satisfaction and clinical standards to assist in their training efforts. Many dental societies and companies offer customer service education and training options.

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