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Keep up with your patients

The recent introduction of CPD pages in the *BDJ* has revealed a surprising fact - approximately 38% of dentists prefer to send their CPD answers by letter or fax rather than by using the internet. This percentage seems extremely high, and way higher I suspect than any other group when one considers this is a work-related activity. I cannot imagine 38% of businesses not using the internet or email when they could in preference to writing a letter (apart from certain obvious activities such as sending junk mail or bank statements).

Today electronic mail (or email) has taken over as the preferred choice of communication for many people, yet not (it would appear) for a substantial number of dental practices. For a profession well-known for its fascination for gadgets when it comes to dental purchases - at first sight this does seem strange. This is especially so because, whether in the office or simply to relatives and loved ones, email has made it so much simpler to keep in touch. In fact it would be extremely unusual to find most businesses outside dentistry not only using email, but also running a website.

Why should this be? Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that for many GPs the benefits of computing may initially seem somewhat obscure. They may see the benefits of having a dental computer program for the practice, but the staff deal with that. Computers (like so many other things in life) are too much bother until you understand what they can do, and then suddenly you wonder how you managed before.

A second reason could be that unlike most other electronic gadgets (DVDs, washing machines, televisions and electric toasters) you cannot just 'read the instructions when all else fails'. Computers require hard work to understand and operate, as everyone who has tried to upgrade from an electric typewriter to a word-processor knows. In other words - email is not easy to get to grips with at first. GPs have very little free time at work to even begin to make the effort, so if you have no natural interest in computers you are unlikely to even start.

A third possible reason for people seeming to 'shy away' from digital communication is the plethora of

gadgets around these days purporting to make our life easier, but in reality creating more problems than we can cope with. Unfortunately this has a 'rebound' effect, so that we reject all these gadgets instead of using those that really do save time and rejecting those that do not.

Whatever the reason, electronic communication is not only here to stay, but is becoming the norm rather than the exception. More and more people are using the internet, and it is getting easier and easier to access it via a range of different ways (mobile phone, computer, television, cafes, kiosks in service stations). You can even access the internet via wireless 'hot spots' now (this means you can access the internet on your laptop computer without plugging into a telephone line). While some of these may seem like passing fads the basic concept of digital communication is not going to go away.

All of this leads to the question - are patients in general becoming more digitally-aware than dentists? The advantages of an internet-based appointment system and recall system (from the patient's point of view) are so great that it will eventually become expected. Although I am sure referral will remain the most popular method of finding a dentist for many years to come, I suspect more people will start using the internet rather than looking in the library or Yellow Pages. Whatever method people use, I am certain that people will look for the practice website, if for nothing else than to identify surgery hours, where to park and how to find the practice.

This means that those dentists who continue to ignore electronic communication will be disadvantaged. While some may choose to ignore what is happening, the fact remains that the number of patients using the internet will continue to increase. Based on the percentage of dentists quoted at the start of this leader who are still not electronically aware - I believe there is a real danger the profession is not keeping up with its patients.

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