Time keeping:

How to keep things running smoothly

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Late running is now an almost universal part of life, from traffic to complications there are an almost insurmountable number of reasons why you might end up running late. Dental practices are no different and if anything can often be seen as one of the worse culprits of late running. Patients don't understand that you can't stop halfway through an extraction to make sure they can have their scale and polish on time. I am exaggerating, if only slightly, but there are things that you as a practice can do to prepare yourselves and attempt to get the day back on track. There are two cornerstones to making this work as a practice: preparation and teamwork.

Preparation

One of the cornerstones of a well-run practice is to make sure you are ready for whatever the day has to throw at you. If you are sat with your team in surgery with the relevant tools and materials to hand for the next appointment you might have a chance of starting on time. To facilitate this as a practice you might decide to come in early to set up the surgery for the first appointment and prepare the equipment for the subsequent appointments in an easy to access format. Unfortunately, all the physical preparation for the appointment will not always stop them from turning up late or for needing a longer appointment than you have booked. So, you should also prepare your daybook for late running. This could be in the form of emergency slots allocated throughout the day. This would allow you extra break points in the day to allocate some flexibility for late running. If these emergency slots regularly fill up it could be worth extending them slightly to allow for both the emergency appointment and the leeway on timekeeping.

You may also be able to save time on the day by sending relevant paperwork to patients ahead of time. If they arrive having completed their medical history, you will not have to wait with them in surgery while they complete it.

Even with this preparation you will inevitably overrun. At that point it can become an exercise in managing patients' expectations. You should implement a procedure to follow to keep patients who are waiting informed. This could be as simple as informing the patient before or on arrival of any late running, especially if this is a significant late running. Giving them the opportunity to wait or re-book, this will make it their choice to wait placing control back into their hands. After the original message if the late running is continuing and will progress past the original expected point you can then have one of the team apologise to the patient, update them on their expected appointment time with another chance to reschedule should they need to. Depending on the practice arrangement and the appointment book it could be that if it is a new course of treatment and the patient is willing, the another surgery could step in to allow the first to catch up.

Teamwork

Dental practices are often a tight knit unit, but they can often look to run their individual surgery to the best of their ability forgetting there might be another surgery which they could help. If you can all work together as a team you may find there are ways to save time and help overrunning surgeries catch up. Simple things such as completing the decontamination process for the partner surgery and packaging instruments will mean

that there is one less person to get into and out of PPE allowing a time saving, and with the new PPE, casts potential savings which will build up over time. You can also stagger your emergency slots to allow for each to cover for any emergency appointments that may crop up during the day. If one surgery has a cancellation, they can check to see whether they can help a late running surgery catch up. This may be as simple as collecting or returning instruments to the decontamination room or stepping in to treat the patient in extreme circumstances. Anything you can do to help things run more efficiently is only going to make the practice run faster.

This is of course using an expectation of a return to business as usual. We don't know what treatment will look like in practice when we return. It may be that time keeping is less of an issue if dental practices are treating fewer patients in a day. It could be that days need to be run on a longer timeframe with increased breaks between patients. Any new normal would not however stop you being able to use efficient time management to make the practice run smoother with increased opportunities to prepare for the appointment beforehand and to help each other provide patients with the best care possible. ♦

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