

# Join the **IT** crowd

The BDPMA offers a helping hand to dental professionals daunted by developments in IT and technology.

By **Amelia Bray**, Chairman BDPMA.

**W**hy does your practice manager sit in their office all day? What's so fascinating about their computer screen? Why don't they do some 'proper' work?

Dentistry has changed considerably in the last few decades but remains, essentially, a hands-on occupation. No-one has replaced a hygienist by a robot (although the reverse may be true). Receptionists are still 'meeters and greeters'.

For practice managers, however, the working world has turned upside down and continues to loop the loop. It's the c-word that's done it. Or, rather, the software on the computers.

First the appointments book was consigned to Room 101 - now it's everything from patient records to the holidays chart.

Practice managers have become qwerty-fingered experts as running the business efficiently relies increasingly on management software. The latest developments promise another step change in procedures.

With practice patient books static or even falling, innovative methods of making an appointment could make a difference. It is now possible for patients to book appointments using the internet - ideal for those who are unable to telephone during practice opening hours or (whisper it) can't get through because your lines appear constantly engaged. You arrive in the morning to find the online appointments automatically updated on your system. Is this too much control surrendered to patients?

What about text messages to patients' mobile telephones? This can be good for reminding them of appointments - seemingly essential these days to reduce chair downtime. You can also use text messages (or SMS - Short Message Service) to inform patients about special promotions, health warnings and so on. Given that this is a relatively new technology, it is growing fast and you should expect to see many developments in the coming months and years - including the inevitable spooks and spam.

It is essential that whichever methods of contacting patients you use they are integrated into your practice management system - not only to avoid confusion and repeat calls but also to enable accurate management reporting.

Staying on the telephone, so to speak, CTI is really going to excite practice managers. Computer Telephony Integration (CTI) means that when a patient calls, the receptionist can identify who it is even before they answer the call and can have that patient's records appear on screen. Answering: 'Hello Mrs Simpson, can I make you an appointment for a check-up?' may have implications of Big Brother and practice managers will need to think carefully about how they re-train staff to answer the telephone.

Financial matters are close to the mind (if not the heart) of most practice managers and the latest software is increasingly sophisticated in this area too. Now integrated with the rest of your practice management system, not only should it crunch the numbers and complete the debits and credits columns but the right software will do payroll and national insurance calculations and track staff holidays.

Stock control and inventory should also be part of a holistic approach - many practice managers have been shocked to discover the potentially redundant value lingering in the stores cupboard. Importantly, practice managers or the appropriate member of staff can be alerted to approaching stock expiry dates.

When it comes to payments from patients, credit or debit card processing is now commonplace. But are practice staff still keying in the amounts to the card reader - with the possibility of error? The latest software transfers the outstanding amount directly to the reader - eliminating those annoying £0.50 payments for fifty quid's worth of dental work.

Finally, there are reports. Fortunately, the days of forest-consuming computer print-outs are gone. Management reports should be presented on screen and in easily understood formats. The depth and breadth of reporting continues to increase, however. Analysing patient turnover, chair occupancy and missed



appointments are critical these days. Add in the financial data and practice managers can begin to work out average hourly rates, how much of the practice turnover is going on premises costs, lab bills and equipment etc. If the practice has closed its book following a surge of new patients, the practice manager can work out when to re-open it and how many new patients to take on.

With practice managers needing to be so IT-savvy, the British Dental Practice Managers' Association (BDPMA) incorporates the use of computers into all the management development seminars it organises.

Begun in 1993 by a group of practice managers who found they benefited from meeting regularly, the BDPMA's ethos continues to this day. Networking groups and regular communications spread knowledge and expertise between the members. When you're about to throw your computer from a top floor window, it's good to know there's a fellow practice manager you can telephone or email to ask how high it will bounce.

In 2010, one of the BDPMA's series of one-day seminars around the country will focus specifically on IT. Open to all comers but with reduced rates for members you can find out more about BDPMA seminars by going to [www.bdpma.org.uk](http://www.bdpma.org.uk) or telephoning BDPMA HQ on 01452 886364. Also, the BDPMA will have a stand at Dental Showcase, which takes place at the NEC, Birmingham, from 12 to 14 November 2009.