



Have you got the  
IT factor?

Dental nurse  
and Clinical IT  
Coordinator  
**Wendy Leach\***  
explains how to make  
full use of information  
technology in your  
dental practice.

#### IT in dental practice

When I began dental nursing in 1981, I had never used or even seen a computer, and I would never have believed that in less than three decades most practices would be fully computerised, ensuring that today as well as clinical skills, DCPs need to add information technology (IT) skills to their CV. The use of the computer within a practice environment is now becoming essential, not only with specific dental software, but also for many other tasks to enable the smooth running of every aspect of the busy surgery.

#### Making the most of IT

I work for Stradbroke Dental Centre, a large specialist and general practice in Tonbridge, Kent, and my role is Clinical IT Coordinator. As this suggests, computing and IT make

up the majority of my role, but everyone who works at the practice uses a computer daily and although this is easy for the younger members of the team, who learnt IT at school, some of the older members have struggled at times, although now everyone is confident and competent in many computer programs.

There are several specific computer programs for dental practices to use. We use Exact Dental by Software of Excellence, which has fully replaced the appointment books and record cards of the old days. The

\* Wendy was featured in a Vital HOTSPOT (autumn 2008 page 7)

reception staff can book appointments, manage recalls, take and process payments, see at a glance empty surgery times, patient records, medical alerts and radiographs with the click of a mouse. Day sheets are printed out every morning, but every surgery has a networked PC so everyone can share and update information easily. All referral letters and communications are scanned and added to patients' records, enabling quick and easy collation of information. Using this program, we can easily produce standard or specific letters to patients if we need to contact them, or personalised welcome letters to new patients, and we can also create a mail merge to a group of specified patients, with many options for the required criteria, such as patients who have had a certain treatments, or an appointment within a certain period of time. Two of our receptionists have been with us for over 30 years and they are now both competent and confident in the use of the dental program; they have overcome their fears and are now quite happy to use a computer instead of an appointment book. We have an internal messaging system so communication can be made without the intercom; hopefully this is better for the patient and we can send messages to one or many recipients – even to everyone at once if necessary.

### Advantages

An obvious advantage of computerisation is that the amount of space formerly needed to store paper records is no longer needed, and information is shared very quickly and easily. Our x-ray system is also fully digital and this makes a great difference in several ways:

- The amount of storage space needed to keep radiographs, as we used to have filing boxes of x-rays in each surgery
- If a dentist needed to see someone else's patient the nurse would need to go and find the x-rays where as now each surgery can call up any patient's radiographs very easily, saving time and space
- Each radiograph can be enlarged to look at a specific area and magnified to many times the size of a traditional periapical or bite wing x-ray
- The patient is exposed to a lower dose of radiation.

Cutting down on paper is of course also good for the environment.

### Non-dental programs

As well as the dental program, we use several Microsoft Office applications, and we also use Apple Macs for more creative uses such as presentations and marketing design.

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Every month new patient statistics are compiled, first using the Exact program to search for all new patients by provider (dentist), then I input these figures into an Excel spreadsheet, enabling me to produce easy to read tables and graphs showing not only how many new patients each dentist has seen each month, but also how they heard about our practice – this helps us identify successful marketing strategies for the future.

Marketing leaflets and posters can be swiftly and easily designed and produced, with templates being saved for easy alteration in the future.

We use Microsoft Access to create and update several databases, one for referring dentists enabling us to contact any dentist who has referred to us easily and invite them to our various courses; one for implant summary – this helps us track implants by manufacturer and enables us to analyse statistics on many aspects of implant surgery – with sections for bone augmentation materials used and what medication patients were given. We can also use this program to ensure that implant patients have booked their follow up appointments and contact them if we need to.

### Practice management

Our practice manager is surrounded by computers in the office! She does all the accounting and salaries on computer, as well as the banking, and she answers many emails from existing and potential patients, some who contact us through a link on our website, and some who contact us direct. Many of our invoices are paid using BACS payments, meaning less post and paperwork.

Also there are presentation software programs for creating stunning presentations (I use Keynote on a Mac) and video editing programs for filming surgery, which is then used for implant training courses and for inclusion in lectures. There is also photo editing

software for creating before and after slide-shows for smile makeover patients and teeth whitening.

Basically, there is no aspect of the practice which has not been transformed by the use of computers, and it would be hard to imagine working in a practice without all the many benefits computers have brought to the dental profession. As we move forward, for dental nurses, and in fact all DCPs, information technology is going to be an essential part of the job, so embrace it – you will never look back!

*Ed's note: We hope all of our readers are embracing the new Vital website too!  
[www.nature.com/vital](http://www.nature.com/vital)*



*Images from top to bottom: digital OPG; example of new patient figures for 2007; marketing leaflet for whitening; slide from a presentation on radiography*