Practice Management

Making Your Hygiene Department Profitable Through a Patient-Centered Approach

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Twenty-first century dental hygienists embrace a comprehensive, health-centered approach to dental hygiene care and treatment plans, making the days of a “buff and polish” appointment obsolete. Hygiene treatment and recare intervals are tailored to meet each patient’s unique periodontal and overall health needs. Those patients fortunate enough to find themselves in the chair of a comprehensive hygienist quickly demonstrate an increased level of periodontal treatment acceptance and increased compliance with recommended recare intervals.

What differentiates a comprehensive, health-centered hygienist? The comprehensive hygienist:

- Assesses the individual needs of each patient prior to treatment, recommending appropriate therapy as indicated. Gone are the days of the routine six-month interval recommended regardless of individual oral health needs.
- Is not influenced by insurance limitations, but rather focuses on optimal hygiene treatment for the patient.
- Builds trust and credibility with patients based on sincerity and integrity.
- Imparts the value of the next recare or periodontal maintenance appointment, reducing the risk of no-shows and last minute cancellations. This involves educating the patient about the reason for the interval chosen and the areas of special concern that need to be monitored closely for disease progression.
- Selects a custom homecare routine to best address the needs of each patient, thoroughly explaining the benefits the patient should experience.
- Stays current with continuing education as a means to further support his/her patients, not strictly for licensing requirements.
- Does not hesitate to use adjunctive therapy, revisit periodontal therapy (scaling and root planning), or shorten the recommended recare interval as indicated.
- Carefully and methodically interviews patients regarding their dental and emotional needs to later transition this information to the dentist, with the involvement of the patient, for a comprehensive treatment plan.

The proverbial fly on the wall would listen in on purposeful patient interviews, thorough assessments, and sincere planning strategies with each patient co-discovering the best method to ensure long-term oral health and maintenance of teeth and gums. Less time would be spent chatting and exchanging stories. Instead, purposeful relationship building is key in the hygiene chair for trust and credibility to be established. Lingering too long on building personal relationships can detract from the patient’s ability to feel confident with the health care he/she is receiving.

Our patient base is sophisticated and their allegiance must continually be earned at each appointment, with the value of the care outweighing the financial investment.

Philosophy of a comprehensive hygienist aside, how can you evaluate the effectiveness of the hygiene program in your practice? Fortunately, it is more concrete than planting that mythical mouse in the corner to eavesdrop! An efficient, patient-centered hygiene program demonstrates:

- A patient base that statistically falls within a standard of:
  - > 50-60% receiving preventative care (D1110)
  - > 30-40% receiving periodontal maintenance (D4910)
  - > 10-20% receiving periodontal therapy (D4341 + D4342)
- A continual flow of patients scheduling for a consultation with the dentist to review treatment options involving
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Three or more teeth that need treatment or to address the patient’s needs through esthetic options. This is developed through a sincere patient interview process.

- A low no-show or last minute cancellation rate, as patients are active participants in their care and value has been built into the recare appointment.

- A consistent, purposeful transition to the dentist during the hygiene exam that includes a relationship piece to allow the patient and dentist to build a level of trust as well as periodontal, function and esthetic findings. If a consultation is in order, the hygienist can alert the dentist at the onset of the exam.

- Growth primarily through internal patient referrals. When patients’ expectations have been clarified through purposeful interviewing and met through exceptional clinical care, they are more likely to refer family and friends.

Comprehensive health-centered hygienists require additional support from their dentists. A doctor-hygiene meeting to clarify the doctor’s clinical and periodontal philosophy will allow the hygienist to further support the doctor’s values and vision for the practice. Further defining the consultation criteria for the patient allows the hygienist to guide the patient in that direction before the exam. The hygienist becomes the patient advocate and promoter for the dentist at the same time. Professional coaching is an excellent means to further develop your hygienists in their quest to become more comprehensive.

Now, how does this impact the bottom line? A top-notch hygiene department can positively impact your profitability in the following areas:

- An increase in periodontal treatment acceptance to include periodontal therapy, active maintenance, and adjunctive therapy

- An increase in profits as the number of six-month recare patients move to a more beneficial three- and four-month interval.

- An increase in demand for proactive restorative and esthetic procedures will emerge as the patient interview process is refined and patients’ desires are addressed.

- Patient loyalty and increased referrals will follow as patients experience a consistent, comprehensive approach that makes your practice stand above previous experiences they have had in other dental settings.

- A significant drop in last-minute cancellations, the silent killer in the hygiene department, naturally occurs as patients become partners with their hygienist in preventing or controlling their periodontal disease. Patients should never exit a hygiene chair without knowing the areas of concern that will be monitored and re-evaluated at the next appointment (such as, sensitivity, gingival recession, etc). This places value on the recare visit even before the current appointment ends.

Additional patient-centered yet bottom-line tactics:

- Offer adult fluoride treatments; they are a great benefit for your patient and are being covered by more and more insurance plans.

- Include two anterior PAs into your periodic x-ray update; another great patient benefit to detect pathology in an early stage.

- Allow your hygienist to call on overdue periodontal patients during down time; statistically they will have more success with the periodontal population than an administrative team member will.

An empathetic, caring hygienist that strives to be comprehensive while vigorously supporting the doctor’s clinical philosophy is one of the most important partnerships in the practice. Time spent developing this role on behalf of the dentist is a worthwhile investment that will see long-term benefits for the practice.