

TIME IS MONEY! ELIMINATE THOSE BA'S AND CA'S

As I give seminars and consult with practices throughout the United States, it never ceases to amaze me that the system most frequently in need of help is the scheduling system. Broken appointments (BA's) and changed appointments (CA's) are an expensive drain on the practice. Understanding "why" they occur is an essential first step in reducing and possibly eliminating them. The second step is to learn how to prevent them and the third is to reeducate your existing patients to exhibit greater respect and responsibility toward their reserved time. Finally, to ensure your progress, it is important to track your practice results to see how well your new system is working. Overcoming this practice handicap will result in less stress and increased satisfaction for the entire team.

When staff members list the handicaps BA's and CA's create in the practice, almost everyone lists the loss of income to the practice, the time spent changing appointments and the time spent "filling holes" in the schedule. Only a few realize the drain on the team's energy and enthusiasm when patients' no-show or are late. A staff member's good attitude is quickly replaced by frustration with last minute, unexpected changes and at times by complacency: staff may think, "Oh well, I only have 10 minutes now before the next patient is due and there's really nothing I can do in such a short amount of time."

To understand how to prevent and reduce BA/CA's, it is first important to understand why they occur. After studying and surveying patients in hundreds of practices, the common elements were patients who were unaware of vital information. Patients need to know: (1) how the appointment system actually works, (2) their overall treatment planned, (3) the time frame for their treatment progress, (4) the dentist's awareness of any missed appointment, and (5) the dentist's and staff's preparation for each patient's appointment. Patients think the dentist's office staff over-book for each appointment time similar to the airlines. Therefore, the statements: "I won't be missed if I cancel"; "Why is there a problem if I arrive late? They are always running late anyway," are common patient expressions. Most patients do not remember or were never told of the importance of their treatment sequencing and the urgency for their optimal health to complete their treatment within a specified time frame. And finally, patients think the Doctor is too busy to notice whether they come in today, tomorrow, or next week. Patients express, "The Appointment Coordinator is the only one who actually knows if I show up and it's her job to make sure I come in at a time that is convenient for her."; "my dentist will be happy to see me whenever I can come." Once you have an understanding of how the patient thinks and feels, then prevention can be your next step.

Mutual understanding begins with the first telephone call. To begin the prevention step the Appointment Coordinator should discuss with the new patient the "reserved time necessary" to have the Doctor's undivided attention for their "individual and thorough new patient examination." You can reinforce this during the new patient interview process and again during the new patient examination. When the patient arrives for the consult and treatment presentation, they are mentally prepared for a discussion regarding a commitment of time as well as finances.

In today's society, Americans often place a greater or equal value on their time as compared to money. This is often the case with patients who are educated dental customers. Therefore, when making financial arrangements at the treatment presentation, it makes sense to discuss scheduling arrangements also. Studies have shown that patients place high value on the dentist's opinion during the diagnosis and prognosis. Discussion of scheduling for reserved time, which comes directly from the Doctor during the consultation, makes the greatest impact.