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Publication Mail Registration No. 5383
Publication Mail Agreement No. 40063878

OD Ontario Dentist

JULY/AUGUST 2005



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THE JOURNAL OF THE ONTARIO DENTAL ASSOCIATION



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How to Reduce No-Shows and Late Cancellations

Chances are, no matter how successful your practice and how loyal your patients, revenues and professional time are lost every week due to no-shows and late cancellations. According to consultant Sandra Gregg, co-owner of Practident, a dental marketing and practice management business in Frankfurt, Ont., it's a common problem, but many patients probably don't realize the impact it has on your business. It's estimated that no-shows and late cancellations on average contribute to 10 percent of a dental practice's lost revenues. Over the course of a year, that can amount to many thousands of dollars lost. When people are stressed and unable to manage their time efficiently, a visit to the dentist is often dropped to the bottom of the priority list.

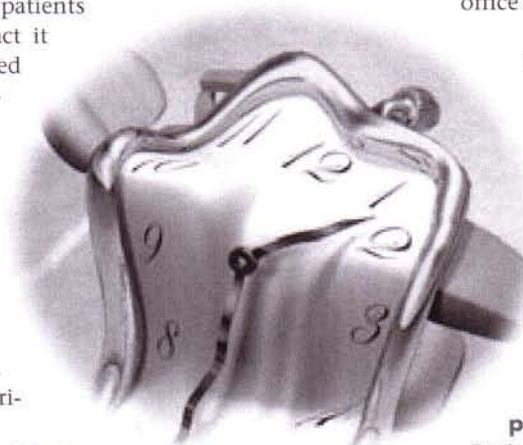
It's a problem ODA member Dr. Martin Shelley of Tall Pines Dental Centre in Kitchener, Ont., understands all too well.

"Sometimes patients think 'Oh he's really busy and it's just a cleaning so it won't matter if I don't come'," explains Dr. Shelley. "They don't realize that the room where they're having that cleaning costs several hundred dollars a day to rent, keep equipped and have a person do that job."

What can be done to stop this from happening? Here are 10 strategies to reduce the number of no-shows and late cancellations:

- 1. Develop a simple, written, easy-to-understand no-show and late cancellation policy that's 100 percent endorsed by you.**

If a patient is unaware of a policy, how is he or she going to adhere to it? Make the policy clear and easy to explain and make sure all dentists, assistants and other office staff recognize its merit.



- 2. Make a commitment by all professional staff in the practice to follow the policy all the time.**

It's unfair to patients or staff to follow the policy only occasionally. A consistent team effort is the key to success.

- 3. Prepare an effective practice letter that communicates the policy and the patient's agreement to follow it.**

Both you and your patient should sign this letter. This will ensure that every new patient is aware of the policy. A polite, concise and well-written letter shows how important the policy is to you and your staff, and makes sure the patient has taken time to read and understand the policy.

- 4. Communicate the policy with targeted messaging throughout your office.**

Communicate the policy in less than 20 words with signs, business cards, and appointment cards, and make sure that this messaging is in waiting rooms and treatment rooms throughout the office.

5. Train your front line service staff to deal with last-minute cancellations and no-shows.

For late cancellations, your staff needs to understand which reasons are acceptable and which are unacceptable. They should know how to be clear, firm and respectful when explaining the policy to the patient.

6. Track the number of cancellations and no-shows.

You cannot gauge how much this problem might be affecting your business unless the number of no-shows and late cancellations is carefully monitored.

7. Review weekly and monthly patient no-show and cancellation results.

Reviewing and discussing the policy regularly is a great way for office staff to feel encouraged by how the policy is improving things. In addition, monitoring the progress of the policy will help everyone recognize what is working and what isn't and make policy revisions as necessary.

8. Set goals to reduce these results over a reasonable time.


You must set targeted goals and communicate them to the staff. Having a target in mind helps keep staff motivated, and the time, money and effort you save can be better spent serving the clients you already have and attracting new patients to the practice.

9. Record reasons for late cancellations and no-shows in the patient's chart.

This will permit you to identify patients who are habitual no-shows and decide on a proper course of action to stop this behaviour from disrupting your practice.

10. Lead with a positive attitude and reinforce the need to reduce the disruptive and unprofitable problem.

You must lead by example. Development of a sound plan and proper training for the staff takes much less time than you think, and will benefit all the staff members and patients who work so hard to keep your dental practice running smoothly.

Discussions with practice consultants and dentists who've implemented these changes in their practices suggest that with a proper system in place, the number of no-shows and late cancellations may be reduced by half. It will take a little bit of hard work and training, but the effort is worth it. 

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