Chapter 11: Continuing Care Systems

The success of both the new and mature practice will depend to a certain extent on the practice’s continuing care program. Despite recent reports of declining rates of caries in children, regular professional visits should remain a patient priority.

Except in the case of emergencies, most dental disease, if diagnosed early, can be treated successfully. Increased research on periodontal disease indicates that regular dental examinations and treatment may help reduce the negative impact of many diseases. There is an increasingly large body of knowledge supporting possible associations, thought not proven cause-and-effect relationships, between periodontitis and some systemic diseases or conditions. Researchers have found that periodontitis and other health problems such as cardiovascular disease, stroke and bacterial pneumonia are associated. Studies also suggest that pregnant women who have periodontitis may be at increased risk for delivering a preterm and/or low birth weight baby.

The purpose of a continuing care visit is not only to clean teeth and take necessary radiographs—although both are customary. This appointment also provides an opportunity to re-educate and re-motivate the patient, as well as to provide maintenance of every aspect of good dental health. It is a continuing presentation in an effort toward optimal dental health.

For patients whose restorative dentistry has been completed and whose hygiene is excellent, recalls may be primarily prophylactic. For patients who have chosen to accomplish their major dental restorative procedures at periodic intervals, this visit will also confirm that the original treatment plan remains valid. The patient also has an opportunity to benefit from any improvement in the doctor’s training and experience resulting from post-graduate study or new developments in dentistry.

A good system of providing continual care to your patients is definitely a service, and many patients rely on and will respond to this stimulus.

Functions
Continuing care appointments dovetail with many other office procedures. Consider some of their important functions:

They reinforce your message to the patient: “We care about you and your health.”

They provide important records and act as an excellent barometer for checking your practice growth. Your best legal protection is an efficient continuing care system. It is documented proof that you are providing complete professional care to your patients.

They can allow a smooth, well-appointed patient flow to your office. It has been estimated that approximately 40 percent of the operative dentistry in a practice comes from continuing care appointments.

Finally, the key to oral health is regular professional checkups as a part of a preventive dental health program. Your professional obligation to your patients’ health includes helping them obtain this care.

Computerized Appointment Control
Your continuing care system is extremely important to both you and your patients because it provides your practice with regular patient visits, while helping them to maintain good dental health through periodic examinations, prophylaxis and radiographs.

Many dental offices today have switched to the benefits of computerized appointment control which allows for more efficient time management. Dental management software includes many features that can enhance office efficiency and productivity. Some of the many features available include the ability to:

• define the time increments between appointments (e.g., 5, 10, 15 minutes);
track missed appointments;

- use screen colors to indicate certain appointments types by procedures;

- enter treatment notes about individual cases that transfer when the appointment time is changed;

- run monthly reports that show future production, new patients and scheduled continuing care exams; and

- search for appointment openings that meet the requirements of time and procedure type.

You should, however, back up appointment data each night to avoid losing data in the event of a power outage or computer breakdown. Some dental offices back up data from the main computer to a second computer. Others back it up onto a CD-Rom every few minutes throughout the day. Find out whether your practice has computerized scheduling and learn the features of the software. A multiple back-up system is recommended.

**One recommended procedure**

The following system is recommended because it motivates patients, allowing them to take an active part in the recall procedure.

The first step is to remind the patient at the time of the visit that regular dental examinations are necessary to maintain proper oral health.

Recommend another appointment in six months or whatever length of time you feel is appropriate based on the patient’s individual dental needs. The receptionist verifies the patient’s name, address, private and business telephone numbers and preferred appointment time. The patient addresses an appointment reminder card to himself, which the staff will mail later. When the patient receives that self-addressed reminder card, it increases the likelihood that the patient will call for an appointment.

The patient information and appointment cards are then clipped together and placed in a card file with monthly dividers and filed in the month that the continuing care appointment will be made. Two weeks before the appropriate time, the receptionist pulls the cards, either schedules an appointment or calls the patient, and then mails the reminder card to the patient.

The receptionist or office manager can call the patient to confirm the appointment. If the patient cancels and does not request another appointment, the patient information card should be filed under the following month (or three months, depending on your perception of the need to recall the patient or on the patient’s instructions) for follow up.

This type of system will involve substantial time on the part of your receptionist. It is important to simplify and expedite your continuing care system whenever possible.

**Other systems**

Other systems can be devised to suit your particular practice. In orthodontics, for example, when appointments are typically only a few weeks apart, patients can schedule appointments before they leave the office. It is wise to keep the same day and time for each visit to help patients remember their appointment.

Other offices just send reminder cards to patients on a six-month basis, asking them to call the office to schedule an appointment. A follow-up phone call in two weeks will encourage them to make an appointment. This system, however, does not provide for follow up by the office for non-responders.

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**Sample Appointment Reminder Card**

Dear NAME,

It’s time for your dental examination and cleaning!

As you requested, we have reserved DATE at TIME AM/PM for your appointment.

If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call us today.

Sincerely yours,

John Smith, D.D.S.
23 North Main Street Hometown, USA 12345 (123) 456-7890

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During the summer months, a mailed reminder to schedule a “back-to-school checkup” will be more effective than repeated efforts to reach by phone vacationing patients. A sample letter can be found in the publication *The Power of Internal Marketing*, which can be ordered from the ADA Catalog.

**Strategic Scheduling**

Scheduling is one of the most difficult responsibilities of a dental practice, according to practice management consultants, and also one of the main reasons for patient dissatisfaction.

Listed below are some appointment control tips:

- Consider increasing appointment times (60- to 90-minute “one-visit” service v. “one” treatment)
- Give patients time options for their convenience (for example, ask if morning or afternoon is more convenient?)
- Consider instituting a 48-hour cancellation policy to reduce last-minute cancellations
- Communicate with patients when dealing with a “behind” schedule (apologize for running behind)
- Assistants can rescue dentists who may be spending too much time with patients
- Allow staff more hands-on authority regarding dental office scheduling
- Periodically review appointment scheduling with the dental team
- Institute electronic scheduling

**Legal Considerations**

Keep in mind that a continuing care system must comply with appropriate laws, including HIPAA and related state laws pertaining to privacy and security. While HIPAA Privacy does not prohibit the use of postcards for reminding patients of appointments, it is important to limit the amount of information on the cards to only that information which is necessary. Be prepared to honor the wishes of patients who do not want to receive postcards. Consult with your legal counsel as appropriate. The *HIPAA Security Kit* and *HIPAA Privacy Kit* are available by calling ADA Catalog sales at 1-847-4746. The suggestions in this chapter and in this publication reflect dental practice considerations only, and are not a substitute for legal advice.

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