



Navigating communications within practices

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Oral and maxillofacial surgeons face communication obstacles daily in three key realms: **patients, players** (team members) and **practice dynamics**. The following are collaborative solutions to tackle these challenges effectively.

Protocols, policies for patients

A patient who disregards pre- and postoperative instructions can create issues. Encourage patients to listen and follow through with instructions such as:

- Instead of, or in addition to, providing patients with a folder of papers to read, consider creating pre- and postoperative videos for each procedure and sending the link to the patient. If you're seeking a video resource, explore Your Virtual Consult (YourVirtualConsult.com), a platform that facilitates the creation of personalized videos tailored to your practice.
- Include a mandatory presurgical virtual session, covered by the surgical fee, to go over the procedure details and the responsibilities of caregivers. A virtual session ensures patients are well-informed and prepared before undergoing surgery.

Office protocols crafted collectively by the entire team prove invaluable in dealing with "helicopter" parents or caregivers who hover over a patient and try to take over control. Conducting an all-team meeting activity fosters participation and ensures everyone is on the same page.

One effective strategy involves creating a script. For instance: "We've discovered that patients tend to behave better and have a more positive experience when the caregiver is not present in the room. Rest assured; we'll provide regular updates on the procedure's progress. However, for the safety and efficiency of our operations, we kindly ask that only team members remain in the operatory."

It is imperative that policies are documented in writing and consistently reinforced during every interaction. Doing so

ensures caregivers are fully informed and cooperative with the established protocols.

Language used by team members can be confusing for some patients, and dental professionals must recognize common clinical terminology may not be easily understood. By adjusting language choices to enhance communication, staff can foster patient comfort and trust and ultimately improve case acceptance.

Effective communication – encompassing verbal, written and virtual channels – is paramount for continually emphasizing the significance and value of the services provided by your practice. Collaboratively crafting a script during team meetings – ensuring consistent verbal skills among all members – can significantly bolster patient loyalty.

It's crucial to foster an environment of problem-solving during all-staff meetings to address unique situations encountered in your practice. A collaborative approach enables the development of innovative solutions that may not have been previously considered.

Initial solutions to inspire your discussions include:

- Rate patients as A, B or C based on appointment reliability and payment status.
- Prioritize scheduling dependable patients, while lower-tier patients include those with frequent no-shows, cancellations or outstanding balances.
- Implement a structured scheduling template for each provider and adhere to it rigorously to streamline scheduling and enhance practitioner efficiency.
- Offer one "Get Out of Jail Free" pass for any scheduled procedure canceled within 24 hours, emphasizing the practice's busy schedule and the importance of respecting appointment times. Inform patients that repeated cancellations will incur a percentage charge of the procedure cost.
- Allocate time in the schedule for same-day treatments, which can significantly increase practice revenue.
- Enforce policies consistently and persistently across the entire team once established.

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Empowering the players

Insufficiently defined or delivered communication diminishes the effectiveness of a team of players.

To avoid this problem, consider fostering team and patient communication through active listening (see CommunicateWithInfluence.org/are-you-asking-intentional-questions). Ask thought-provoking questions, demonstrate empathy and remain flexible to enhance mutual understanding and reduce misinterpretations. Recognize that stressful times can impact morale, health, wellness and individual performance.

Also, cultivate a team-centric culture to ensure full engagement and commitment from every member. Culture serves as the heartbeat of your practice, reflecting the tangible actions and beliefs of your team.

A robust culture persists even when the leader (not just the boss) is absent and can gain momentum through collective inspiration and binding everyone together, regardless of departmental differences. Other team-centric initiatives to consider implementing are:

- Participate in team-based continuing education courses, whether live or virtual, throughout the year.
- Establish goals for attending conferences and share key insights and knowledge gained during team meetings following the conferences.
- Designate a volunteer “wellness officer” within the team to regularly check in on employee health and maintain awareness of the practice’s overall well-being.

Another way to improve team effectiveness is to empower your team by equipping them with problem-solving skills by:

- Developing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) collaboratively as a team to address various scenarios, such as team member conflicts, handling difficult patients, HIPAA compliance and OSHA regulations.
- Designating a leader responsible for continuously studying and updating the constantly evolving approved protocols to ensure everyone remains informed.
- Providing your team with a diverse set of problem-solving skills to effectively navigate unforeseen situations.



Negativity can spread rapidly and detrimentally affect team morale. What might begin as an isolated incident can quickly escalate into a series of negative experiences. A proactive approach to understanding each team member’s communication preferences is crucial. It is worth noting that communication styles also can vary across generations.

To foster teamwork, establish a regular communication process. During daily, weekly, monthly and annual meetings, a designated facilitator or leader within the practice – not necessarily the OMS – should ensure that each staff member checks in and contributes to the conversation.

Increasing the frequency of meetings and fostering intentional communication throughout the year can significantly enhance team relationships.

Strategies for practice dynamics and referrals

Levin Group’s ongoing 30-year study (DrBicuspid.com/dental-practice/article/15379231/is-your-team-accountable) of the top 10 percent producing practices underscores the importance of fostering a culture of accountability.

The study highlights six key strategies to enhance accountability:

- **Establish clear deadlines or calls to action** – Define task due dates to increase each team member’s efficiency.
- **Practice realistic time management** – Allocate time relative to the deadline to ensure tasks are completed efficiently.



- **Flexibility with deadlines** – Allow for positive negotiation and adjustment of deadlines when necessary.
- **Foster feedback and suggestions** – Encourage team members to share insights and propose new strategies for task completion, including renegotiating deadlines.
- **Communicate desired results** – Ensure team members understand the objectives of their assigned tasks.
- **Welcome questions and clarifications** – Save time and energy by encouraging thoughtful inquiries to increase the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes.

A highly accountable team can enhance practice efficiency and adherence to established systems, often resulting in increased profitability, performance and productivity. Cultivating a positive culture of accountability leads to greater job satisfaction and fulfilling careers for all team members, as each individual reliably fulfills their commitments.

Incomplete information from referral practices can pose problems. Facilitate seamless completion of referral documents by implementing streamlined processes within practices. Designate a dedicated individual to oversee the referral process, ensuring nothing falls through the cracks.

Initiate the patient handoff process in the referring office by fostering personal, positive and professional communications. A possible conversation could be: "Sharon, meet Linda, our office manager. She'll assist you in scheduling your next appointment with the oral and maxillofacial surgeon and address any questions you may have about the implant treatment we discussed today."

Develop a standardized handoff blueprint for referring offices, integrating it into their software as a template. Require completion of all fields to prevent overlooking critical information.

Ensure prompt transmission of referral information, including all necessary details. Encourage patients to schedule their appointments with your practice before leaving the referring office.

Customize the referral information based on the specific treatment recommended and further refine this process through collaborative discussions in the all-team meeting regarding date seen; patient name; patient age; special considerations; X-rays sent electronically; patient history of the area; diagnosis; and instructions team members gave the patient.

While each OMS practice encounters its own set of communication hurdles, certain recurrent issues tend to surface. Embracing a proactive stance and deploying structured strategies to equip teams and engage with referring offices can yield substantial benefits for everyone involved.

Dedication to refining communication protocols not only bolsters operational efficiency but also cultivates enduring patient, team and referral relationships. Effective communication fosters loyalty and trust, laying the foundation for continued success and positive outcomes in OMS practices. ■

To learn more, check out the 2024 Annual Meeting session, *The Referral Revolution: Thriving in the New Dentistry Era*, where Lisa Copeland addresses the changing referral dynamics and offers strategies to adapt and thrive.



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