Developing a functional mentality

The normal recipe of a dentist working in a surgery assisted by a nurse with a receptionist in an office adjoining the waiting room is so ingrained in the thinking of most dentists that options for change are rarely, if ever, considered. Yes, we think about issues like how to get the best from our nurse, should we have a computerised appointment book, should our x-rays be digital. But, most such ideas are less likely to increase efficiency or generate more profits or increase the capacity of their time spent working. How people working there spent the majority of their time subverts and through your practice are rarely part of the average dentist’s stream of consciousness.

How can one’s practice of dentistry be more efficient? By developing a functional mentality. The following ten steps will illustrate how this can be done:

1. Pause to reflect on what you are doing at the moment

Observe your daily working patterns. The following scenario is likely to be enacted between ten and forty times each working day: patient arrives on time for 30-minute appointment, checks in with receptionist, sits in waiting room, waits 20 minutes, is sent to surgery, given injection, waits a few more minutes, has three fillings done by dentist assisted by nurse, plus two x-rays by the dentist, leaves surgery after 40 minutes, queues at reception to pay and book another appointment.

2. Reflect on obvious points of inefficiency

- Patient arrives on time, is kept waiting for 20 minutes
- Patient is given injection and dentist waits for 5–10 minutes before proceeding
- 30-minute appointment has stretched to 40 minutes, dentist now running 30 minutes late
- Patient queues at reception.

3. Consider obvious possibilities for eliminating inefficiencies noted in point 2: What things could be changed easily?

- Employ extra receptionist
- Book longer appointments
- Minimise wait for injection to take effect.

4. Carry out functional analysis of what does and does not work at the surgery

Everything that happens and everybody who works at your practice conforms to a pattern which if you look for long enough will be definable. Define it.

5. What possibilities for change exist (stretching the envelope, even going over the edge)?

Four-handed or even six-handed dentistry, multiple surgeries for individual dentists, different rooms for different procedures, and not having cabinetry in the surgery are some of the more obvious possibilities, known and practised by some for many years, rejected by others as too complicated or too expensive. Many new ideas will arrive with active thought.

6. What would the ideal scenario be?

In an ideal world, the dentistry would like to practise would not have constraints of time, space and costs. Thus we would all like to see more than 6 patients each day, work four days/week for 40 weeks a year; we would have two surgeries, a discussion room, a laboratory on site, have three nurse and two receptionists, not to mention a hygienist/therapist, treatment co-ordinator, marketing manager, radiographer.

7. What steps need to be taken?

Firstly start dreaming. Second, transfer your dreams to paper. See what they would cost. Discuss possibilities with an advisor. Begin somewhere.

8. Consider cost of implementing these solutions

Everything has a cost. The only good thing about costs is that they have a range which is easily quantified. Carry out the exercise for essential, desirable, and would be nice things to have. Digital x-rays are essential, two surgeries are desirable, a Cerec computerised crown-cutter would be nice to have.

9. What benefits?

Digital x-rays are easy to store and vastly improve your diagnostic capacity, two surgeries and three nurses would improve your productivity; a Cerec would save having to make provisional crowns and save loads of time and make you less reliant on your technician.

10. Decide on strategies to be implemented

Sit down with your accountant, bank manager, spouse, financial advisor and/or practice consultant/advisor. Work out an action plan and start changing your working life; and in the process become wealthier and more efficient. Good luck.

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