

The old conundrum

Sim Goldblum explains how to balance a stress-free life with the hassle of patients.

During a recent workshop on 'Starting your own practice', we asked participants to describe their ideal practice. One bravely replied, 'I envisage having a modern, stress-free practice that runs itself'. Another participant reacted and said, 'You won't be having any patients then?'

Much laughter ensued and we then spent a few minutes exploring what was meant by the initial wish and the somewhat cynical response.

Four characteristics were identified, modern, stress-free, running itself and having patients. Are these four mutually exclusive? Are there any obvious reasons why having patients prevents one from running a stress-free practice? Must a practice be stressful?

I do not propose to have a deep, philosophical discussion about good stress and bad stress. However, it is true that many of us function much better when we are stressed to a certain degree and when that stress arises from positive factors of being busy, of feeling that the work that we do is valued, and that our team is performing to the best of its ability.

Conversely, when our stress derives from worries about the work that we do, about the way the team performs, or the satisfaction that we are giving our patients, then it is probable we are experiencing negative stress.

I think it is fair to say, if we are working in old and inappropriate facilities, that would cause difficulties



● Do you rush your patients through their appointments?

for team members and patients and these difficulties might lead to stress.

Having a 'modern' practice does not mean having an expensive refit or a new-build practice, but does, in my opinion, mean having a building fit for purpose as a dental practice. One that gives the impression, through the logical construction and workflow, the principal has thought deeply about how to make the best use of space while meeting the needs of patients and team. Is the practice visible, inviting and accessible from the outside? When inside, does it inspire

confidence and are the patient's first views of the interior welcoming and relaxing?

When the patient is greeted by the receptionist using the patient's preferred form of address, is it immediately obvious that the practice

has a protocol for welcoming new and returning patients? Are all the administrative matters dealt with in a professional and

friendly way and is the patient given the necessary information about whether his or her appointment is likely to be on time or slightly delayed?

There are, of course, many protocols that need to be written to ensure the

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Practice 'runs itself'. These include: reception; all of the clinical elements; the use of therapists or hygienists to maximum advantage; the way each team member understands the importance of their role and the ways in which their individual roles knit together to make each patient interaction seamless; the sympathetic, understanding and non-confrontational way in which potential complaints are dealt with initially; the effective use by the reception team of techniques to ensure payments are taken, new appointments booked and the practice's referral system initiated before the patient leaves the premises; all the necessary behind the scenes processes that make purchasing materials, effectively maintaining relationships with the selected laboratories and ensuring health and safety requirements are met.

I'm sure by now we are all used to the exhortation the principal must

spend time working *on* the business rather than *in* the business. While it requires determination and discipline to create the space that allows one to stand back from the daily routine, it is, together with the recruitment of a qualified and experienced practice manager, one of the most likely ways to ensure the practice does run itself.

So why does the patient disrupt our beautifully designed, smoothly working system? Certainly not with malice aforethought, but perhaps because the system was designed for us rather than for the patients. Was the patient recognised and addressed appropriately by the reception team; did you and your nurse take the time to listen to and understand what the patient really wanted to achieve from their visit, or did you reach a hurried, partial and inaccurate understanding because you were running late and knew you had some urgent tasks to do during your lunch-time?

So there we have it. We have a great system which is capable of helping the practice to run itself. The trouble is, people get in the way. Ourselves and our team because we are not as well trained as we should be, and distracted perhaps by the daily pressures that exist outside our practice lives; and our patients are not as organised or as disciplined as we'd like them to be.

Our system therefore must be able to react to these daily challenges and to allow for human failings. Time spent developing and refining our protocols and processes is onerous but in the long run, it gives everyone the chance to perform at their best and to enjoy themselves. ■

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