

A guide to computerizing your dental practice

Part 10 - The Future

Martin Harrison

Managing Director, DentalPlus

(First published in Dental Practice magazine, October 2007)

One year, when I was a small boy, we visited a famous Gypsy fortune teller in her booth on the Blackpool Promenade. After crossing her palm with silver, she gazed into her crystal ball for a few moments before pronouncing that whilst I would have an eventful life, full of books, learning and riches beyond the dreams of Croesus (all manna to my mother's ears) my life line would falter and stutter to a halt at age 53. For someone who has absolutely no belief in the supernatural, and who intentionally walks under ladders, crosses the path of black cats, accidentally breaks two things and refuses to break a third, and tries to walk up the stairs as my wife walks down (she won't allow it), this approaching birthday started to occupy my thoughts more and more. Every cough and splutter, every sniffle, every minor cut and graze was examined for signs of bodily deterioration, sepsis, gangrene and worse. Unbelievably, on the appointed day I found myself continually glancing at the clock and wondering if I'd make it to midnight. Such is the power of suggestion coupled with a small dose of hypochondria. Not to say that my brain is a perfect specimen. For instance I can remember absolutely nothing containing a name: friends, streets, places, yet I can remember virtually all the meals I have prepared or eaten across the world, and can make an exact match of a colour tone I glimpsed on the hull of a canoe in Bora Bora to a colour chart, thousands of miles and years later. Some people have perfect pitch, I have perfect Pantone. Obviously one of the odder genes must have passed to my daughter for as a child she struggled to remember left from right, and still involuntarily pictures her "writing" hand in memory to confirm. Unfortunate then, that as soon as she went to Dental School she was confronted by the fact that right is actually left, and left is right.

Over this series of articles I have covered all aspects of computerising your practice, from taking the initial decision, through deciding on the hardware, implementing the software, the importance of training, and mentioning along the way the imperatives of planning, security and common sense. All these are still available on the DentalPlus website at www.dentalplus.co.uk – look under Support/Advice.

This final article was going to concentrate on the future of computing and how this will affect you, all those wonderful gadgets you can plug into the USB port such as coffee cup warmer, a combination clock and letter opener, or a hand massager – how did we manage without them? Systems are evolving on a frighteningly rapid basis, even whilst I have been writing this series computing power has increased by a further 40% with the advent of quad core computer processors, but as Abraham Lincoln said, "The best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time". The future is already here - it's just not very evenly distributed, nor is it easy to predict.

At least 20 years ago academics and scientists were predicting the downfall of the printed word due to the advent of easier access to computer visual display devices. The reality has been quite the opposite. Although we have all the tools at our disposal to view information on a computer screen, mobile telephone or iPod, we still like to have a printed copy and more trees than ever are being cut down to support our paperless office. Humans are natural squirrelers of bits of information and perhaps we all feel safer when we have retained a hard copy rather than trusting it to invisible magnetic media spinning at 4,000 rpm. Jim Joyce, Xerox's vice-president of office services has said that world paper consumption has tripled over the past 30 years and that "The wealthiest woman in China today owns a paper-recycling plant".

There has been a sustained advance of computer technology, the trickle effect of minor improvements day by day with the odd seismic shift resulting in a benign evolution rather than revolution. At DentalPlus we play our part to ensure that not only do we keep up, and develop the latest technologies, but our customers also benefit through our frequent update program, and all at no additional cost.

However, when I take a step back and look at how our future can really be improved, I keep coming back to the one factor that machines can't make better, and that is people. Yes of course we need to have the correct hardware and sophisticated software to support us, but if we are not careful we let it take charge, make the decisions for us, whilst ignoring our own skills set and knowledge base. Use the Navigator in the car, and why would you want to turn left when you know that the correct route is to turn right? My wife had a period when she wanted to travel to an address just a few miles away, but it kept sending her the wrong way. We finally discovered that the country mapping was set to Luxembourg and we were regularly heading off for a trip on the ferry. Where machines are involved we suspend our belief and have started to accept that machines cannot make mistakes, but if we feed in the wrong information then we get the wrong results. Why would I now want to use a calculator to check a simple addition when at age eight I used to be able to carry out complex mental arithmetic multiplying pounds, shillings and pence? Are we being dumbed down through lack of confidence in our own ability, or are we just dumber?

Increasingly we have let machines take control of our lives, sometimes without realising it. That infuriating telephone call centre couldn't have happened prior to push button phones, then without the brainwave that an option list would speed up the flow of directing your call to the right department more efficiently. The reality is that as soon as your call connects it immediately says that "Due to current high demand..." then it plays a message about "recording this call for training purposes", then, and only then do you eventually get the options to join another queue and be put through to someone who informs you that you dialled the wrong number in the first place.

What we want is to reduce our dependence on machines, and re-instate our connection to real people. Systems are getting better and better, they do most of what we want, and they do it well. John M. Richardson, Jr, said that "When it comes to the future there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen, those who make it happen, and those who wonder what happened".

So, in summing up, I would recommend that when you look for a new system in your practice you investigate all the options, check out the functionality and features, then double check the human element. How do they handle your call, do they have real knowledge, and can you trust them, are they termed Sales Executive, and if so what executive powers do they hold? If you have a problem or a training issue will it be via a call centre with someone logging your issue then passing you through to one of a team of customer service advisors or, as in our case, will it be direct to one of the people who was instrumental in the design and development of the whole system, can answer all your queries and can make change happen?

Implementing and managing Practice Management Software is all about long term partnerships. I want to know that when I call I can speak to the same person again, that not only do they remember me but also remember why I called the last time. I don't want voicemail, unless the promise of a returned call actually means a prompt return call. In essence what I want is a people centred future, and in return I understand that I too have to play my part and be flexible.

As Alvin Toffler said "The illiterate of the future are not those who can't read or write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and re-learn".

Martin Harrison is the managing director of V3FM Ltd, the company behind the DentalPlus practice management system, and the developers of the V3.Web and LinkUK public library information and resource discovery systems.

