

A guide to computerizing your dental practice

Part 7- Communications

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The concierge of the hotel in the Piazza Barberini impressed on us the two most important rules of being a tourist in Rome: keep a firm grip on your valuables and pay utmost caution to the traffic. With cash and cards safely buttoned in my shirt pocket we strolled slowly down one side of the Piazza doing a little light window shopping. Just a few yards from the hotel a gypsy with a baby and young daughter were begging for a few lira, and as we approached, rushed up to us with a large handwritten card which she pushed up at me as she pleaded for money. Pandemonium followed as passers by grabbed and kicked at them, someone jumped off his scooter and pushed the girl away from us, and general abuse was hurled. The woman, baby and child slowly walked away and the crowd dispersed. We were initially shocked at how the Romans had treated them, changing our views somewhat when we discovered that during the melee all my cards and cash had vanished. On the far side of the Piazza my wife spotted two Carabinieri so whilst she jumped into the road, arms akimbo, stopping the traffic as she rushed across, I crept into the side street where the perpetrators had been seen leaving. They were still sauntering slowly up on the pavement so crouching down, I rushed up in the roadway hidden by the line of parked vehicles, and popped up in front of them grabbing the woman with one hand and the child with the other. Instantly up popped a hand still holding all my cards and cash, and whilst I stuffed these back into my pocket, the woman broke free and I was left with just the child. Shortly afterwards a dozen Carabinieri swung into the road, and we were all whisked off to the local police station. The Italians still have a love of paper so after some delay typing our statements on an old Olivetti, in carbon triplicate, we added our signatures then left. Of course we had absolutely no idea what we were signing; the detectives spoke no English, we spoke little Italian.

All of this brings me to communications – accurate communications. Your business depends on being in touch with your patients, and with your colleagues, and ensuring that any information transmitted between two parties is accurate, accessible and available. You should look at any practice management system to ensure that the communications module assists in providing timely and patient specific links. You need to be able to talk to patients, so obviously the patient record must contain contact telephone details, but some modern systems can extend this so that via a single click you can have Voice over IP direct dialling saving both time and money. Emails are a very useful additional communications method, and with rapid growth in internet connectivity all work and most households now have access. Many dentists are finding that SMS text messaging pays dividends, allowing recall reminders to be sent to patients shortly before their appointment is due, reducing FTA's, improving surgery throughput and profitability (or at least limiting losses). Printed reminders are the old standard used by most dentists, but of course they do have an overhead, both in the manual work required to select patients, folding and stuffing envelopes, writing addresses where necessary, trailing to the post office and of course the cost of the stamp.

No method of communication, with the exception of a person to person telephone call actually guarantees that the patient has received, or read the reminder. With emails you can set a flag so that a report is automatically forwarded to you when an email has been read (though without a guarantee that the right person has read it). With SMS you can employ a third party company who processes the text messages on your behalf and then gives you a daily status report of those read/unread.

With emails, patients may respond with a message of their own, so you must ensure that your system also has the capability of receiving emails, attaching these directly to the patient record, whilst also providing the user with access to all emails received. Each communications method has a cost, email being the cheapest as it is effectively free (providing that you have broadband installed), Voice over IP is next, then standard telephony, then SMS, and finally the mail. However, all are more cost effective than the loss of income when patients fail to show. Not all practice management systems will provide all these access methods, older ones mainly being restricted to just printed material.

Communications is not just about dealing with patients; it is also about efficient access to, and distribution of, information. It is the system which needs to know about which method of communications the patient prefers. It may well be that their patient record shows they have telephone, fax, email and SMS, but that they prefer to be emailed at work rather than home. You may want a more belt and braces approach where say one week or so before an appointment you write to them, then a couple of days before you SMS or email them. The system must be configurable so that electronic communications can happen automatically without you having to process each patient individually.

A practice also has a need to communicate with others outside the patient group, professional referrals, letters to suppliers, etc. DentalPlus has a directory as part of the system that allows users to create their own lists giving multiple contact details for each individual, corporate body or organisation. Entries in this address book can also be stored under multiple subject categories, making it possible to find an individual either directly by name, by organisation or category grouping. Documents sent out to others should be part of the system, and you should be able to create these as printed documents, or as attachments to emails. The system should permit new letters to be written from scratch or based on templates. Templates have the advantage that most of the details can then be filled in automatically, standardising the process and ensuring a greater degree of accuracy.

One of the basic tenets of any efficient communications system should be the adherence to standards. We already use standards when transmitting data to and from the DPB using Web-EDI for NHS claims. DentalPlus already allows patient records to be transferred electronically from one linked DentalPlus system to another (in the case of multi-site practices). Perhaps a longer term goal should be that patient records should be electronically transferable directly from any one practice management system to another. I can imagine many of you throwing your hands up in horror at the thought of someone else reviewing your treatment plans several years later, but even if you did not send patient records to another practice, it would be useful to have a standard for when you change your practice management software supplier so that records from your existing system could be exported in a standardized format then re-imported into your new system. It's quite possible that in time records may have to follow the patient anyway (subject to patient opt-out – they already do when you change your doctor so why should dentists be different? Others are already thinking this so there may be future pressure for this to happen.

One last thought, on mobile telephones. I saw an interesting application from a Swiss dental group who use mobile phones to communicate between all the dentists in their large practice. Most of the dentists are not full time, but work different days and different times. To make optimum use of the available facilities each dentist would be allocated an available surgery and a personal mobile telephone. All contact between reception and the dentist was via this mobile enabling a dentist to be traced whether in the surgery, digital imaging suite, recovery room or elsewhere. The contract with their mobile provider gave free calls between participating members of a group, so providing a more cost effective method communicating within the practice than a fixed telephone distribution system

Finally, referring to our earlier incident in Rome, news of our triumphant seizure and arrest had reached the local restaurant where we ate that night, and we were feted with aperitivi, a delicious three course meal and Spumanti – all for free. Food and drink – now that’s a language everyone understands!

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