

A guide to computerizing your dental practice

Part 8- Imaging

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Walking down the avenues of the mausoleums of the very wealthy in the Recoleta cemetery in Buenos Aires is proof that for some, life after death can be just as pampered and almost as luxurious as being alive. These grand palaces, in the classical styles of the Romans, the Greeks and the Egyptians soar above us as we peer through the leaded lights of the padlocked doorways to the shelves where rows of coffins are neatly stacked. Turning a corner, we are surprised to see a recumbent pair of legs sticking out of one tomb's entrance onto the pathway. Slowly a bottom shuffles backwards, then a torso, then finally a smiling youth with a feather duster in one hand, a polishing cloth in the other, oblivious to us all with his headphones plugged into his iPod as he shakes to the beat of the latest hits. It appears that even the dead have impeccable room service, as on other avenues we see entire armies of young men with mop buckets, bunches of fresh flowers, Windolene, and furniture polish to give that all important sheen. How wonderful that the anticipated future world is treated with as much love and respect as the present – perhaps for some even more so as there is always a large group surrounding the final resting place of Evita (Eva Peron, wife of former Argentinean president/dictator), fresh flowers tucked into every nook and cranny. For her though, a rather more modest residence than in life.

In order for me to fund and enjoy this future “lifestyle” I think I need to start claiming for tripping over paving stones, wearing shoes that pinch my toes, slipping on ice when a blizzard is blowing, carelessly cutting myself on tin cans, or the biggest money spinner of all – compensation for medical negligence. Anyone unlucky enough to have been ill in bed and forced to watch the endless drivel that is daytime television will know that someone out there will help you to get it, obviously on a “no win, no fee” basis. There may be risk in life, but not when making a claim.

This article is about imaging. My collection of images are in a variety of formats; photos, slides, digital, video tapes, CD's, DVD's and 8mm film. Although they are the key to all my memories of the past, I have absolutely no idea where to find most of them. Rather like in business, what I need is a foolproof filing system.

Within your practice you will use one or more imaging techniques; radiography, intra-oral cameras, cosmetic imaging, snapshots for patient recognition, etc. Each will require a different piece of equipment, probably from a different manufacturer. It is likely that each is stored in a different format and structure, each will come with its own software and perhaps its own database. After all of this expenditure it's no use having sophisticated practice management software that can't then link directly with each set of images and it's impractical anyway for PMS suppliers to write several hundred permutations and versions and variants of interface. Additionally, you and your staff also have the hassle of switching between several sets of unconnected software and learning how to control and manage each. The solution is to use a dental imaging software package that provides an interface between the equipment and your PMS and which manages all of the various image types, constructs its own database of images and patients, and gives a comprehensive range of diagnostic and analytical tools which then give one single point of entry, both for you and your practice management system.

Software solutions, for example the system provided by Digital Dental (using the DentalEye software) interfaces directly with all your individual elements of hardware, so that you can have diverse equipment such as Schick digital X-ray sensors, Durr Vistascan image plate scanners, Digital Doc Aurora cameras. All images they produce will be stored in a central image store with a combined and indexed database. This gives practice management systems, such as DentalPlus a single point of access and in the case of this example the DentalPlus software will interface directly with the DentalEye database so that it can seamlessly transfer patient details in and out of their database as well as identifying and displaying images without having to leave one software environment to go into another.

Most importantly for you, utilising this route gives complete freedom of choice over the digital hardware you purchase, and therefore the suppliers, with the added bonus of having to learn only one set of digital management software techniques. There is also the distinct advantage that you can add to your imaging equipment in the future, secure in the knowledge that the interface software is being constantly updated and can be adapted and enhanced to support the latest acquisition.

Now back to my earlier theme of compensation. Dentists are becoming an easier target for litigation, encouraged by some fringes of the legal profession to persuade the public to “get that cash payout to which you are entitled”. Perhaps a few intra-oral images, taken on a regular basis and stored with radiographs, along with careful patient notes, all being date and time stamped automatically in your practice management system, may just give you an added level of protection. Intra-oral images are also useful for comparison of oral lesions being kept under review or to aid description on referral of a patient for a second opinion. After all no one can argue with photographic evidence.

The next article will deal with the importance of staff training on the features and functionality of your practice management system. This and all previous articles are all still available on the DentalPlus website (under Support: Advice) along with an unbiased guide to hardware considerations when computerising your practice.

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