

A guide to computerizing your dental practice

Part 9 - Training

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It always strikes me as amusing that entirely rational, intelligent people can say things that, if they inspected their words later, they would realise were either plain daft, or worse, excruciatingly embarrassing.

Some time ago we were on a cruise heading towards the Galapagos, Easter Island and Pitcairn; areas of the earth so remote as to be 5 days cruising from any major land mass. Crossing the equator is always a cause for celebration, and usually King Neptune makes an appearance calling on all the uninitiated (those who have not crossed before) to perform some task. This frequently seems to involve kissing a rather large fresh, but thankfully lifeless, salmon. After the arcane rituals and various incantations they officially become Shellbacks (i.e. those who have "crossed the line"). Such jollities are always accompanied by much merriment, and a sumptuous buffet complete with several quite spectacular and detailed ice sculptures, but I did overhear one of the elderly passengers saying to her husband, "I wonder what they do with the sculpture when it's melted?". Relaying this to our companion at dinner, a former American ambassador to Chile, he recounted that someone had once asked him, "Do you think the crew sleep on the ship?", and "Does the ship make its own electricity?". You wonder why the blindingly obvious answer doesn't come to mind, but often it is just better to smile and not confuse them further.

This article is about the importance of training. We all need to keep up our skills, and the profession has recognized this by introducing continuing professional development, not only for the dentists, but now extended to dental nurses.

As with all training it needs to be focussed, the information to be imparted needs to be accurate and a percentage of the CPD needs to be certified, i.e. to have been approved, not just information collected via the internet which may, or may not be correct. My daughter, now an Oral surgeon reminded me recently that those who are supposed to know don't always. When at school her class was asked to give an example of the food chain. Hers was concise and to the point: Grass, Goose, Fox. The teacher, resident of an inner city suburb, insisted that geese never ate grass and that foxes were rather nice kindly animals who as well as helping elderly ladies cross the road caused no one any harm and that reports of their behaviour were just propaganda from the countryside lobby. Rather put out, our daughter responded that every morning she looked out of her bedroom window and could see the geese happily cropping the grass, but that occasionally she would look out at a pile of feathers, or a discarded wing tip, denoting that the food chain was alive and well, even if the goose wasn't

Rather like the teacher, you and your staff may have preconceptions about how your practice management system works. Some people will be gung-ho and try anything, others will be timid and terrified to do anything on the basis that they could do more harm than good. It is said that familiarity breeds contempt, but in training terms familiarity breeds confidence.

Accurate and easily digestible information is an essential in installing any new computerised system, and in some ways this is even more important when changing systems than starting from scratch. Don't assume that the initial training the supplier provides will be sufficient. Not that the training package won't be excellent, just that we all have short term and long term memory, and it is impossible for a whole host of complex details to be instantly absorbed from a product with which we are not familiar.

At DentalPlus we recognize the importance of a comprehensive approach to training so first we install the software remotely, then visit to give an initial training session, leave the user with a test database of a few thousand patients and computer generated appointments to play around with, then after a week or so pay a further visit to re-install a clean database (or the data transferred from a previous system), train again and demonstrate some of the more in-depth features. Training sessions should be split into an overview, usually to the whole group of clinicians, nurses and other practice staff, and then hands-on sessions tailored to the individual needs of the receptionists, the nurses and the dentists.

You will have made a substantial investment in your new computers and practice management system and the full benefits can only be realised if everyone is utilising the system to its maximum potential. For instance, someone may not use the rearrange function to move an appointment to a different date or clinician, but rather cancel the original appointment, then make it again from scratch because "that's what we always did with the previous system". The end result may be the same, but the difference in time taken to complete the task may be several minutes. The whole point of a new system is to achieve something better than you had in the past, not to try and replicate previous or manual procedures and this does demand a change in the mind set of the staff. As the practice principal or manager you should see training as a valuable ongoing task and should allocate resources appropriately.

As a system supplier we provide training split into all these main areas:-

Design – the most important, as you want the system to be as user friendly and clear as possible. Once you have learned some basic ground rules then you should be able to figure out the next step intuitively because rules are consistently applied across all the various sections

Initial training – as described above, overview then individual hands on demonstrations

Documentation – used as a detailed referral to all the functionality. Always good to have but usually sits in the corner and almost never gets used

Online – each major function is covered by our "HelpTalk" system which is reached by a direct on-screen icon which in turn links to a context sensitive training video that demonstrates and shows how to complete the specific task. This is great for refreshing your memory and invaluable for training new staff

Remote assistance – we can connect to your system, see your current screen and talk you through any issues and show how to carry out functions

Ongoing – Further on-site training, especially useful after the first couple of months. By this time users will have become familiar with the general system functionality and these sessions are designed to identify and correct bad practice, and to ensure that the staff are using the full functionality to achieve the most efficient use of their time

Finally, encourage your staff to keep a “gripe book”. This is where they should log issues that they have with the system; tasks that they think could be done better another way; new functionality that would improve carrying out specific tasks, etc. Have a dialogue with your system supplier, get them to make changes and implement new features. At DentalPlus we actively encourage this exchange of views and our developer program means that we are able to evolve and progress your good ideas and make them available for the benefit of the whole DentalPlus community. After all we have designed the system primarily for your benefit, not ours!

If you want to discuss aspects of any of the articles in this series, or are seeking general advice on computerising your practice then come and visit us at Stand C17/18 at Dental Showcase where we shall be pleased to help.

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