Deciding when it’s time to hire another hygienist

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Question: How long should a patient have to wait to be scheduled with a hygienist after being diagnosed for scaling and root planing?

Answer: Next available appointment.

Question: In your practice, WHEN is the next available appointment?

Answer: 1 week, 2 weeks, 3 weeks, 1 month, 2 months?

Question: As a healthcare provider, are the answers to these questions acceptable to you?

At Today’s Dental, my staff and I took a long hard look at these questions. Were we meeting the needs of our hygiene patient’s in an acceptable, timely manner? We have three full-time hygienists who are scheduled 4–6 weeks out.

How do we accommodate those patient’s who need longer appointments as soon as possible? Do we bring in a temporary hygienist one day a week? We believe it is important to keep our patient’s with the same hygienist, so this becomes a scheduling challenge to throw a temporary hygienist into the mix.

Should we hire a fourth hygienist? Will we be able to keep a fourth hygienist busy part-time or full-time? How many extra days of hygiene do we really need?

Do we give up our emergency doctor room #4 for hygiene one day a week? Does it make sense financially to give up our most lucrative room, our emergency doctor room #4, for our least lucrative room, a hygiene room? Emergency patients usually need root canals, crowns, and extractions which run 30 to 50% net income. Hygiene procedures such as cleanings, exams, and x-rays are usually 80% to a 110% overhead, especially if you have a cancellation, no show, or a reschedule or two.

We also had to make sure our emergency doctor room #4 had all the necessary hygiene equipment and instruments needed. I personally think every room should be setup for hygienists and dentists. This added versatility is a must for operations and logistics. It is so nice to be able to put any patient, for any reason, in any of our eight treatment rooms.

Another factor to consider is are we providing enough time in the schedule for our hygienists to do their most productive work? If your hygienists have production goals, I guarantee you this is also an issue with them!!

Our answer to this question was to NOT bring in another hygienist at this time, but to utilize Hygiene Block Template Scheduling. In our hygiene schedules we have blocked out two-hour time slots for scaling and root planing. The blocks are staggered two weeks apart to enable scheduling of all four quadrants at once (two quadrants per appointment). The blocks are also staggered by morning and afternoon to allow better availability for patients. We also blocked out time for each hygienist equally for our patients who have a hygienist preference.

Our hygiene schedule is blocked through December 31, 2005. Based on your past history, your practice can estimate how many blocks a week are necessary for your practice. If the blocked time is not filled the day before, we do then fill them with regular cleaning appointments. I recommend you have all of your staff members raise their right hands and take an oath not to fill the blocks with regular cleanings until one day prior!!!

Most practice management programs can password protect blocking and unblocking of the appointment book template. This has greatly improved our availability for our patients who need longer hygiene appointments.

It is important to keep building your “short call list” with patients you can move up if needed in case you do not fill your reserved blocks.

It may take a few months to implement Hygiene Block Template Scheduling in your practice due to a full schedule, so start blocking today!