

The personal touch: How technology can strengthen the bonds between patients, professionals

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The personal touch

How technology can strengthen the bonds between patients, professionals

If you think having a high-tech dental practice somehow depersonalizes patient care, you should talk to Chris Hammond.

"It's just the opposite," says Dr. Hammond, who shares a patient-centered, yet technologically sophisticated general dental practice with his father, Dr. Roy Hammond, in Provo, Utah.

"We have used technology to improve the human side of our practice, to develop closer relationships with our patients—just the opposite of the cold technological environment that some dentists might imagine," says the 36-year-old graduate of the School of Dentistry at Oregon's Health and Science University.

Adds Dr. Hammond, "The way we use technology in our office allows us to offer a higher level of patient care than could be offered in any other setting or environment."

Housed in a one-story professional building east of Utah Lake, the Hammonds' dental practice employs a dozen staff members and serves more than 4,000 patients of record.

Each of the office's 11 operatories is equipped with a fully integrated computer system that allows a broad range of dental services—including payment and insurance filings—to be handled in one self-contained treatment room. All operatory computer terminals, as well as seven other workstations on site, are linked through a server.

"We have eliminated the front desk," notes Dr. Hammond. "If you were coming to our office to have your teeth cleaned, for example, you would be met either in the parking lot or at the front door by your dental hygienist who would take your coat, hang it up and walk you to a treatment room."

And there you would remain until your visit was complete. Only the two dentists travel

from room to room.

Recording everything through a wireless headset and equipped with a light pen rather than a mouse (for easy sterilization), the hygienist is able to take a medical history, provide clinical care, take credit card or other payments, file insurance forms and arrange return visits—all without ever leaving the treatment room.

Each integrated office system includes hardware and software providing intraoral cameras, digital photography, digital radiography and more.

"After the dental visit, the same hygienist then walks the patient out to the parking lot—with an umbrella if it's raining," says Dr. Hammond. Whenever possible, he adds, patients will be served by the same dental hygienist and dental assistant on each return visit, allowing patients and care givers to "build a personal relationship."

He adds, "I think when patients come to a dentist, that's what they want. They want personal interaction. They want a warm environment. They want somebody who cares. They want time to talk to somebody, to ask their questions and get answers."

Dr. Hammond's father agrees.

"As we've added one system or another, we've always asked: What's going to be the return on investment?" says the elder Dr. Hammond, who founded the practice in 1967. "The return may be a dollar return. It may be increased efficiency, or it may be something less measurable—our ability to interact with people personally and to grow our practice with referrals from satisfied patients." ■

— James Berry