

How to manage the behavior of patients who disregard scheduled appointment times

Q HOW CAN WE MANAGE THE BEHAVIOR OF PATIENTS WHO ARE CONSISTENTLY LATE, DO NOT ARRIVE FOR APPOINTMENTS OR CANCEL AT THE LAST MINUTE?

Efficiency is one of the key factors in the success of any business. For dental practices, the schedule plays a critical role in the practice's ability to operate efficiently. Patients appreciate being seen at their scheduled time, since it shows that the practice values their time. However, even the most efficient schedule can be undermined by patients who are late, do not arrive for appointments or cancel at the last minute.

MANAGING THE BEHAVIOR OF PATIENTS WHO ARE LATE

Almost every practice has a few patients who fail to arrive for their appointments on time. This behavior becomes especially challenging when patients who have been with the practice for many

years develop the habit of arriving late. Although dentists may choose to go easy on these patients, regardless of whether the patient has been with the practice a month or a decade, the effect on the schedule is the same.

To discourage tardiness and build value for scheduled time, front-desk team members should thank patients who regularly arrive on time. They also should inform patients who are late in a professional, nonconfrontational manner that the scheduled time was reserved specifically for them. Even normally prompt patients will be late occasionally owing to events beyond their control such as road construction, traffic accidents or a child's illness. Team members should be flexible and understanding in these cases. When dealing with patients who frequently are late, however, team members need to take a different approach.

The first step in managing the behavior of patients who are late is to identify habitual

offenders. I then recommend that any patient who has been late two or more times within a year be handled slightly differently from other patients. These patients should be given a scheduled time that is 15 minutes before the appointment time. Although it is possible that these habitually late patients will arrive early, by scheduling them 15 minutes early, practices can maintain an efficient schedule and see other patients on time, while minimizing the effect late patients have on the schedule.

MANAGING THE BEHAVIOR OF PATIENTS WHO DO NOT ARRIVE FOR APPOINTMENTS OR CANCEL AT THE LAST MINUTE

There are patients who either miss their appointments or call at the last minute to inform the practice that they will not be coming in that day. In my opinion, a patient who cancels at the last minute is no different from one who does not arrive for an appointment. In either situation, the practice loses unrecoverable production and time and the patient's appointment will

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need to be rescheduled. In most cases, when patients miss one appointment, the profit level for procedures performed at the rescheduled appointment is low.

I recommend that staff members track missed-appointment and last-minute-cancellation rates. Dentists should establish a target rate of 1 percent for missed appointments and last-minute cancellations, keeping in mind that a practice with a consistent 5 percent no-show rate may lose up to a year of production every 20 years. This is a situation that should not be tolerated from a practice productivity standpoint.

The key to managing these behaviors is to start with a six-month retraining program. The first time a patient misses an appointment, he or she should be rescheduled for an appointment no less than two weeks later. Rescheduling him or her for an appointment the next day or week sends a message that not arriving for a scheduled appointment will be tolerated. Unfortunately, in the

slower economy in which practices have more open appointments, patients are being rescheduled much sooner after not arriving for an appointment or canceling at the last minute.

The second time a patient misses an appointment within six months, staff members should politely inform the patient that there is a fee for missed appointments, but that the dentist has requested it not be applied at this time. This approach sends a message to the patient about the severity of the problem and creates more value for the practice.

After the six-month retraining period, any patient who misses two additional appointments per year should be placed on a short list and called only when there are openings or should be dismissed from the practice. In no way is this suggestion meant to be harsh, but managing the behavior of habitual offenders requires a firm approach. After all, these are patients who either fail to arrive for an

appointment or cancel at the last minute on a regular basis.

CONCLUSION

The behavior of patients who are late can be managed, and most patients who do not arrive for scheduled appointments or cancel at the last minute can be retrained. Unfortunately, there is a minority of patients who do not respect the practice's schedule and feel it is within their rights to not show up or to cancel at the last minute on a regular basis. These patients are harmful to practices in the long run, and the dentist needs to establish a policy regarding how to manage the behavior of these patients. As I suggested, if retraining fails, the dentist may not want to retain these patients. ■

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the American Dental Association.