

Patient Accounting Issues and Bill Collections

Patient experience is more than just customer service. It is also how dental offices handle finances and billing matters with patients. While every effort should be made to accurately estimate costs and avoid unexpected balances, sometimes it becomes unavoidable. However, the way these financial matters are handled can significantly impact the chances of payment and, crucially, the preservation of a positive and trusting relationship with the patient.

The number one complaint about dental offices on the internet is about money and how the patient feels it was handled by the office. Do everything possible to handle it well in your office to ensure patient is experience is as good as possible. Unfortunately we can't do anything about the fact that we put drills and needs in our patients mouths and they have to pay us for that, but we can do our best to make the payment process as smooth as possible.

Customer Retention and Patient Experience

Maintaining a strong focus on customer retention and prioritizing the patient experience is crucial for our dental office. Patient retention is vital for a thriving dental office as it leads to long-term relationships, repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Satisfied patients are more likely to continue seeking our services, which directly impacts our revenue and reputation. Consistently delivering outstanding care and though money needs to be handled, the goal should be to maintain strong patient relationships, solidify the office as a trusted dental provider in the community and hopefully maintain a long term patient base.

1. **Prioritize relationships:** Focus on maintaining patient retention and satisfaction throughout the debt collection process. Emphasize the importance of their oral health and well-being.
2. **Provide exceptional customer service:** Ensure that the patient experience remains positive and supportive. Promptly address any concerns or issues that may arise, demonstrating empathy and understanding.

Accurate Estimations and Minimizing Unexpected Balances

The first step toward ensuring a smooth financial journey for patients begins with accurate out of pocket estimates. There are initial steps that need to make sure your office is doing well to try to avoid balances in the first place.

Clear and well trained office policies

1. Entering insurance correctly at the new patient appointment. Too many times, employees believe they are selecting the right plan but without the right training, can select the wrong plan. This will ultimately result in wrong calculations and ultimately with an unexpected balance. Make sure your employees who handle entering of any insurance are completely trained
2. Enter treatment plans correctly and double check details. When treatment plans are entered incorrectly or changed by employees that don't fully understand the financial implications, it can skew the financial expectations for the patient.
3. Have Clear Payment Policies. Have a comprehensive financial policy agreement that clearly outlines the dentist's expectations regarding payment and communicates them to patients.
4. Educate patients: Ensure that patients fully understand their financial responsibilities, including the obligation to pay for services rendered. Provide clear explanations and answer any questions they may have.
5. Use the words: "this is just an estimate". Though patients tend to not fully remember what was said, it is vital that all employees always remind the patient whenever having any discussions about out of pocket amounts or insurance that it is just an estimate.
6. Signed Treatment Plans: Patients tend to forget that discussion explaining that it is just an estimate and that there is no guarantee of what the insurance will pay, therefore clearly stating that at the bottom of treatment plans and getting their signature will help to remind them, when there is an unexpected balance.
7. Have 3rd party finance options: The office should have a two or three third party finance options for the patient to consider using during the treatment presentation portion, as most people prefer to at least consider monthly payments for larger dollar amounts over paying one huge amount. Not every patient will use the financing but it allows them to consider that option. Also, make sure the team is well trained in presenting finance options.

Collect Before or at Time of Service

Collecting payment at the time of service or before from dental patients is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures that the dental office maintains a steady and reliable

cash flow, which is essential for sustaining operations, investing in advanced technology, and providing quality patient care. Secondly, collecting upfront helps reduce the risk of unpaid or overdue bills, minimizing the administrative burden and costs associated with chasing payments. Moreover, it promotes financial transparency and trust between the dental office and patients, as it sets clear expectations regarding payment responsibilities.

1. Train the team to discuss finances: Not everyone on the team is comfortable with or has had training in how to discuss finances or balances. Confidence is key when discussing balances and the team needs to be comfortable with it.
2. Communication and Reminder Systems: Implement friendly reminders: Establish a system to send friendly reminders to patients about upcoming or overdue payments using preferred communication channels like email, text messages, or phone calls.
3. Personalize communication: Tailor your approach based on individual patient preferences and circumstances. Show empathy and understanding, addressing any concerns or difficulties they may be experiencing.

The Unavoidable Reality: Handling Balances with Sensitivity

Despite diligent efforts, there will be situations where unexpected balances arise due to various factors, such as insurance complexities or unforeseen treatment needs. When faced with such circumstances, it is paramount for dental offices to approach the matter with empathy and sensitivity. Recognizing the potential financial strain on patients and the impact it may have on their overall experience is essential.

1. Early Intervention and Resolution: Timely follow-up: Contact patients promptly after missed payments or non-payment to address the issue.
2. Put yourself in their shoes. No one is excited to get an unexpected bill. Make sure the team understands that and seeks to understand any challenges they may be facing.
3. Negotiation and payment arrangements: Work collaboratively with patients to find mutually beneficial solutions. Consider options such as setting up payment plans or offering discounted settlements, while considering the dentist's practice policies and financial constraints.
4. Be a dental office, not a bank. Have a few 3rd party options in your office to allow patients to get financing for larger balances. Work to help them get financing on the back end of treatment with these companies, just as you would have at the beginning of treatment, had the balance been expected.

The Crucial Link Between Balance Handling and Payment Success

How a dental office handles outstanding balances plays a pivotal role in maximizing the chances of receiving payment. By approaching the situation in a friendly, understanding, and non-confrontational manner, dental offices can foster open lines of communication and collaboration with patients. This positive approach encourages patients to engage in discussions regarding their financial obligations, leading to a higher likelihood of payment resolution.

1. **Preserving Patient Relationships and Trust:** One of the most significant benefits of handling balances with care and professionalism is the preservation of patient relationships and trust. Patients value their dental providers not only for their clinical expertise but also for the overall experience and level of care they receive. A compassionate and understanding approach to balance resolution demonstrates a commitment to patient satisfaction beyond the treatment chair. It conveys that the dental office genuinely cares about patients' well-being and is willing to work together to find mutually beneficial solutions.

Third-Party Bill Collection

1. **Understand legal considerations:** Emphasize the importance of complying with local, state, and federal laws governing debt collection, including the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA) or any relevant legislation in your jurisdiction.
2. **Engage a reputable third-party bill collector:** Utilize the services of a professional debt collection agency that specializes in healthcare debt collection. This ensures compliance, protects your reputation, and improves the chances of successful debt recovery.

Documentation and Record-Keeping

1. **Maintain accurate records:** Document all communication, agreements, and payment histories with patients. This helps create a clear audit trail and ensures legal compliance.
2. **Secure data management:** Safeguard patient financial information by utilizing secure electronic record systems and adhering to relevant privacy laws, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Legal Disclaimer

1. Consult with legal professionals: Seek legal counsel to ensure compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and ethical guidelines related to debt collection.
2. Include legal disclaimers: Add appropriate disclaimers in all communication, emphasizing that debt collection efforts are made in accordance with applicable laws and regulations. Encourage patients to address any disputes through appropriate legal channels.

By following this friendly and legal approach to debt collection, dental offices can increase the chances of successfully collecting unpaid bills while maintaining positive patient relationships. Remember to consult with legal professionals to tailor these strategies to your specific jurisdiction's requirements. By prioritizing customer retention and exceptional service, dental offices can navigate the debt collection process while safeguarding their reputation and the overall patient experience.