

Scheduling your success

by Ginny Hegarty

Rebalancing an awkward schedule allowed this practice to turn around its down hours.

A pediatric dentist at his wit's end asked me if he should consider split shifts for his practice, since they were busy early and late but struggling to fill the 10 a.m.-to-2 p.m. time slots.

The staff had tried everything, but patients were simply unavailable during those hours. After meeting this team, I knew this issue wasn't going to be solved by working longer or harder. This practice needed to try something radically different.

Disaster central

The staff complained of headaches, tension, stress and a lack of enjoyment in their work. This resulted in high turnover. We talked about what was most important to the doctor and staff.

Their wish list included: introducing children to dentistry in a fun and non-threatening environment; having time to provide fearful patients with extra TLC; an environment that instilled confidence and calmness for the parents; and the opportunity to enjoy work.

Plan of attack

Simple, short procedures could be scheduled during the busier times. The next step was to create scheduling guidelines that mirrored these goals and beliefs. The staff understood that it was in the patients' best interest to bring their children in during the mid-day hours.

Verbal skills training gave the staff the confidence they needed. For example: "Mrs. Stevens, our experience shows that the children do best with this procedure when they are well-rested. For that reason, Dr. Jones does this procedure mid-morning. He can see Joshua at 10 a.m. on Tuesday or 11 a.m. on Thursday. Which do you prefer?"

Much to the amazement of the staff, parents complied. The staff was allowed to create guidelines that they believed served everyone's best interest; this was key. Your patients will accept what you say if they believe you believe what you say.

Staff members knew that when patients or parents were unwilling to follow the practice guidelines there wasn't much they could do without violating their professional beliefs. Staff believed it would not be in the best interest of a scared four-year-old to receive a pulpotomy at 4:30 p.m.; therefore, the staff was able to firmly, but gently, reinforce the guidelines.

Successful and productive scheduling is not a matter of luck, timing, geography or demographics. It's about understanding your scheduling goals and devising a plan to guide your staff to achieve those goals.

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