

PEER-TO-PEER ARTICLES  
WRITTEN BY YOU  
OUR MEMBERS!

MEMBER  
FEATURES



## MEET THE MEMBER

Cathy started working in her father's dental practice over 50 years ago. After all this time, she still loves dentistry, the patients, and working with her team; some of which have been by her side for more than 20-30 years. She enjoys the incorporation of new technology and learning about the science behind the oral-systemic health connection.

# Preventing POST- APPOINTMENT Let-Down

MEMBER ARTICLE | BY CATHY MAURER

We've all been there. A really nice patient comes in after years away from the office and their mouth is in terrible shape. Your hygienist explains the reasons behind gingival inflammation at great length, as well as the stages of periodontal disease. They talk to the patient about why scaling and root planning is necessary, and how they'll need to watch to see how the tissue responds before what comes next: a routine cleaning or a periodontal maintenance visit. The doctor reinforces the same information.

The patient seems to understand as they leave with their next appointment card in hand. A few weeks go by and unfortunately insurance has paid little to nothing. Now the patient is furious with you, stating, "I just wanted my teeth cleaned!"

Somewhere between hearing and understanding what was said to them about their disease and

receiving a statement from you or the insurance provider, the patient experienced a complete loss of memory regarding the education and coaching they received during their appointment.

Now is when you're secretly hoping the documentation by the hygienist and doctor will support your effort to back up the care and service provided. If no documentation was made regarding what was done and said, then it did not happen; according to rule of law. Being able to quote some choice phrases from clinical notes is very useful for triggering someone's memories. Usually, it's adequate to satisfy the patient, too.

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## ...PREVENTING CONTINUED

But how can we prevent something like this from even happening in the first place?

It's not the practice's fault that a pandemic frightened a patient away for months or that someone decided brushing and flossing weren't worth the extra time. When someone visits the practice and presents with an oral condition where a preventative cleaning isn't possible, then a few simple steps should be taken to prevent confusion.

Information written and presented by the practitioner is the most meaningful literature a patient can receive. Intraoral photos of the swollen, inflamed gums can be shocking, but gets the severity of a patient's condition immediate recognition. Brochures or printouts that reinforce what was presented during an appointment are also very useful; the ADA has many to choose from. Some dental applications have built-in features useful for patient communication. An example would be Florida Probe, which comes with excellent educational printouts specific to a patient's condition.

A post-visit phone call or text message to the patient from the doctor or hygienist are helpful. Even if it's just to make sure they're recovering well from their visit. Small actions like a call can make a patient feel cared for. Plus it will help them realize that their condition was a little more serious than a typical checkup, opening the door for further comprehension.

A treatment plan should always be provided. In our office, the patient signs the treatment plan, and a copy is sent home with them. We generally include the treatment

needed and our usual and customary fees at this point, with an approximation of what the patient's portion will be, how many visits it will take to complete, and how much time will be needed for each visit. Some patients will appreciate more detail. It can be tough to gather this information quickly when you're juggling multiple events at once (answering phones, checking patients in/out, etc.). Asking to follow-up by email is generally acceptable, and we always ask if they would like encrypted messages. Most prefer unencrypted, but asking their preference removes any HIPAA non-compliance issues. This also gives the patient time to review the information and respond with questions that they may have been too overwhelmed to think of before. Keeping communication open is always critical for patient satisfaction.

It's important for dental providers to remember that patients can be easily confused and unable to comprehend new terms or descriptions of oral conditions they've never encountered before. They may even be fearful of some information or experience

a phobic reaction that inhibits their ability to recall what was said. While it is everyday information for us in dentistry, it can be quite the reverse for a patient. Reassuring them that their questions are welcome and giving them something in writing to reference about their visit will eliminate surprises and disappointment for your patients (and you!). ■



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