

Continuing Education and Dentistry

• Anita Jupp •

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Iwish I had brought my team with me." This must be the number one remark overheard at continuing education seminars and conferences. Yet when a dentist brings up continuing education courses in the dental office, he or she often hears: "I'm not willing to give up a Saturday to take a dental course! Are you mad?" What we hear from auxiliaries, however, goes something like, "My dentist won't pay for me to take a course." Or, "I haven't taken a course in years, I don't need to."

With today's increasing clinical and technological advances, no one can afford to brush off continuing education or to diminish its value. We are lucky to live in a society that promotes and encourages higher learning. To take advantage of continuing education options, you need a dental team that is flexible and more importantly, that has the motivation and initiative to learn and grow.

As someone who has been involved in dentistry for 25 years, I cannot imagine doing things in a dental office the same way we did them 10, even five, years ago. The business side of the practice is changing as computers, the Internet, hygiene programs, patient education, new technology, and modifications to dental benefits are having an impact on our day-to-day activities. Clinically, advances occur just as frequently, proving that dentistry is still a challenging profession. Continuing education is key to moving ahead in this evolving environment.

Continuing Education and Your Staff

Demanding that team members take a course as part of their job is not the best way to encourage learning. If your staff do not want to be at a course, chances are they won't pay much attention or take many notes. Impress upon them that learning can be fun — attending courses does not have to be a boring or dreaded task. It's what we put into it that makes continuing education so rewarding. And getting together with other motivated dental professionals to share ideas can be beneficial.

To encourage your staff to be open to new ideas and techniques, you must set policies that are clear and well understood. Ideally, you should hire people who are already enthusiastic about learning. When interviewing candidates, ask them about their goals in dentistry, how they feel about continuing education, and if they are prepared to take courses on weekends.

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Motivating existing staff who are not interested in taking the time to learn is difficult. However, as the business owner and employer, it is up to you to establish and enforce policies regarding conferences and seminars. If you want growth and continuing education to be part of your practice, you must make a point of encouraging these values. If a dental program is taking place on a weekend, you should pay staff for their time since it is part of the job. The same applies for evening programs or for any course that does not take place during office hours. One option is to schedule courses during regular office time. This isn't always possible, of course, which is why it is important to have clearly written policies on continuing education.

Staff that have been employed for a long time and that are totally resistant to change can really hold back a practice. If, after repeated requests on your part, these people are not willing to make an effort, it is probably in your best interest to let them go and to hire someone who is more motivated and enthusiastic.

Many team members are actually held back by the dentist. "Our practice has so much potential, but the dentist does not seem interested in changes or in learning anything new," is a comment I have often heard. As a business owner myself, I know it is not always easy to implement new ideas, as budget, time, staff training, and implementation considerations must be weighed carefully. To encourage dentists who are not inclined to make changes, take the time to write out why the proposed changes would benefit the practice, the patients, and the team. Explain how and when they could be implemented. Most business owners would be thrilled to have a team willing to make changes happen. Taking a program together also helps when it comes time to implement new ideas and techniques. If the dentist still chooses not to do anything, the other team members will eventually adopt the attitude that "it's just a job," or may move to a progressive practice that offers more challenges.

Implementing Changes

How many times have you taken a continuing education program, thoroughly enjoyed it, and returned to work gung-ho to incorporate the ideas into your practice? How often did

you actually implement those ideas? People are afraid of change. Sometimes they don't realize that changes don't have to be dramatic. Small changes can make a big difference.

After a seminar, plan a short meeting with the entire staff, comment on the highlights of the program, and ask each team member to suggest one or two ideas that will improve the practice. Dentists often tell me the hard part in making changes is finding time to do everything. Delegate to your staff; hold them accountable.

Evaluating Your Staff and Practice

I find dentists do not take enough time to evaluate their team regularly. Evaluations don't have to be a negative experience. How can your team members meet your expectations if they don't know what those expectations are? Evaluations are a great opportunity to let your staff know what they are doing well and where they can improve. It is also a great opportunity to ask what motivates them and what courses they'd like to take to further their dental knowledge. You may have someone in your practice who is bored with assisting and who would enjoy the challenge of becoming a treatment coordinator. Your hygienist may want to spend more time educating the patients and using the computer simulation system to introduce a smile analysis. There is often a lot of untapped potential in dental offices.

Determine your training needs based on your evaluations. And remember — training takes time and requires organization. Plan training time each month, and put someone in charge of the training schedule. Stick to the training schedule. Who is it going to benefit? You and your practice. New skills learned by your staff can help improve efficiency, patient care and teamwork.

You also need to evaluate your practice. What sort of dentistry would you like to do? How are you marketing your services? Could you improve your patient education? Do you have the right staff? Do you need to review your computer system? Are you current with changes in dental benefits?

When you invest in training for yourself and your team, make sure you receive a return on that investment. If you are not willing to implement new ideas or techniques you learned through continuing education courses, what is the point of paying for these courses? The return on your investment can only come from you — learn, implement, encourage, and motivate. The opportunities are there. Are you willing to challenge yourself? ♦

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