E-mail — Twenty Reasons Why You Should Have It in Your Dental Office

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Communications technology is changing and expanding at an unprecedented rate. Fifty years ago, many dentists did not have a telephone in their offices. They most certainly did not have a fax machine or a computer. Today, however, these communication tools are part of our daily routine, both in and out of the dental office. We don’t need these devices to cut a Class I cavity or to perform a restoration, but they are useful when it comes time to take care of our business affairs.

One of the best “new” methods of communication is electronic mail, better known as e-mail. E-mail is a term used to describe mail that is sent from one computer to another via a computer network. With all the Internet hype going on these days, e-mail may seem like a new medium. Yet the first e-mail program was developed more than 27 years ago. Like conventional postal mail (better known now as snail mail), there is a sender and a receiver and a method for getting the message from point A to point B. The Canadian Press reports that there has been a 10% to 15% drop in the amount of letters mailed through Canada Post Corporation since electronic mail became popular (www.canoe.ca/TechArchive/990131_email.html).

Electronic mail is inexpensive and convenient. Most importantly, it represents a new communication standard for a growing number of patients and professional contacts. E-mail will not replace the telephone, but it can become a valuable business tool that will enhance your relationship with your patients.

How Does E-mail Work?

Most e-mail is sent using a specific address for both the sender and the receiver. The standard format uses a name and an address, joined by the “at” symbol (username@location). The user name describes the e-mail account holder and the location represents the computer company that is going to handle the mail. My e-mail address is maclean@ns.sympatico.ca. It tells people that my user name is “maclean” and that my mail will be handled by Sympatico in Nova Scotia, Canada. Sym-
Why Should You Have E-mail in Your Dental Office?

**Dental software compatibility**
Some dental software companies have integrated functions that allow you to send invoices and appointment reminders to your patients via the Internet. Say goodbye to stamps and to licking and stuffing envelopes!

**Patient newsletters**
Send your patients a monthly newsletter informing them of the new treatments you offer. Once you have created a mailing list, all you have to do is push one button to send the document to everyone. Either e-mail a generic text or use merge files to customize the document with personal information.

**Staff memos**
Many of your staff already have e-mail. You can create a list of their addresses to send one memo to all staff at once. Minutes of your meetings can easily be attached to e-mail.

**Skip tracing**
Since people don't necessarily change their e-mail address when they move, you may be able to find a patient who hasn't left a forwarding address through his or her e-mail account. Great for finding transients such as university students.

**Long distance e-mail faxing**
To help you save on long-distance charges, some Internet companies allow you to e-mail a letter to another city where they will then fax it locally.

**Office signature files**
Electronic letterhead can be created so that information such as your telephone and fax numbers, office address and hours, Web site address, and even brief dental health care notes, can be automatically added to every e-mail.

**Post-operative instructions**
Show your patients you care by e-mailing them standardized post-operative instructions. Or set up an "E-mail Autoresponder" or "Mailbot" that will automatically respond to a patient's electronic request for information, regardless of time or place. To find out more about mailbots, send a blank e-mail to faqmbot@nassist.com.

**Patient information and treatment plans**
Send your patients information about treatment plans or refer them to one of the many Internet sites on dental treatments.

**Appointment reminders**
E-mail is great for appointment reminders and confirmations.

**Patient payments**
Patients can use encryption e-mail to send credit card payments to your office for processing. Eventually, they will be able to pay with "cybercash" (http://www.cybercash.com/).

**Communication with your dental association**
Associations like to relay messages to their members in a suitable time frame. Your association can deliver an urgent message to your computer within seconds. Your opinions regarding important issues can get back to your association just as quickly.

**Communication with other dentists**
Discuss treatments and procedures with a dentist who is half-way across the world or in the next province. There are approximately 16,000 dentists in Canada alone.

**Mailing lists**
Join a mailing list to receive information on a particular topic of interest.

**Savings**
Time is money. E-mail can be a very efficient way to send and receive information.

**Supplies and equipment**
Many dental supply companies allow you to buy products over the Internet. You can also find out more about a product or piece of dental equipment you want to purchase on that company's Web site.

**Prescriptions**
In the near future, you will be able to send your prescriptions to the drugstore via a secure e-mail network.

**Communication with your software company**
No need to worry about time zones anymore. Send your software company an after-hours e-mail and have them call your office first thing the following business day.

**Listserv access**
A listserv is an automatic e-mailing program that sends messages back and forth like a two-way radio. Listservs are organized in topics such as dental amalgam, dentistry, oral pathology, etc. When you send a message to a listserv, it is forwarded to all its subscribers. For more information on Canadian dental listservs, try Canadian Listserv at http://www.canaden.com or Atlantic Dental Listserv at http://www3.ns.sympatico.ca/maclean/adl.html. A great site about listservs and mailing lists is located at http://www.mindspring.com/~cmcleod/maillist.html.

**Referrals to specialists**
Items such as x-rays, videos, pictures and charts can be easily attached to e-mail and sent over the Internet to your dental specialists. The originals stay in your office.

**Patient interest**
Many patients are excited about using this technology. They like the convenience and flexibility that e-mail offers.
The risk of infection should be weighed against the potential toxicity of the anti-retroviral drugs, but when appropriate, chemoprophylaxis must be started within one to two hours after the exposure and should continue for four weeks.

The recommended chemoprophylaxis is AZT 200 mg three times daily for four weeks and 3TC 150 mg twice daily for four weeks. These drugs may cause gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea), fatigue, peripheral neuropathy, anemia and headache. Some of these side-effects may become debilitating while the drugs are being taken. The safety of 3TC during pregnancy has not been established.

An unfortunate reality of health care restructuring in Canada is that delays in emergency care may occur. Such delays may occur even in emergency rooms in major trauma centres where sensitization to dealing with such a health care crisis should exist. Staff from the author’s dental clinic who have received known HIV-contaminated injuries have encountered delays of several hours in getting appropriate counselling and chemoprophylaxis in the emergency department of the dental clinic’s own hospital, despite the author’s impassioned demands for care.

Dental offices should check with their local health units or hospitals to ensure that injured personnel will be attended to immediately upon presentation and that the appropriate chemoprophylactic drugs are on hand for immediate administration, should they be necessary. Dental offices that treat several patients known to be living with HIV may wish to consider having at least one or two doses of these medications in their emergency drug kit, so that delays in medical attention are not a factor.

Percutaneous exposure to blood-borne pathogens such as HIV is a hazard every clinical practitioner in dentistry faces. By being properly forearmed with the necessary knowledge and protocol, practitioners can reduce the risk of seroconversion for themselves and their staff to as low as reasonably possible. Practitioners have a demanding enough practice without having to worry about the “terror factor”10 of what to do if and whenever this unfortunate event occurs.

References