Abstract

Unattended patient appointments have a significant impact on dental practices. They generate negative stereotypes of patients, as well as negative practice income. Top reasons include lack of transportation, time, forgetfulness, practice location (urban or rural), socio-economical status, weather conditions and present oral health status. The odds of unattended appointments are significantly higher in patients aged 19-35 years compared to those 65 years and older. Females also more commonly cancel appointments, compared to males. Re-formulating a new office policy will not only be practical, but produce a cost-effective analysis and significantly increase patient attendance. Calling and/or sending email reminders the day before scheduled appointments will also contribute to improved patient compliance. The implementation of a fee for missed appointments and proper patient education regarding the importance of attending dental visits will also contribute to decreasing this problem.

Background

At Sharbin Dental Centre, an office policy exists, but unfortunately lacks the proper necessary enforcement of patient unattended and short cancellation appointments. A short cancellation is any appointment that is cancelled less than 48 hours prior to a scheduled appointment. An unattended appointment consists of any scheduled appointment where the patient does not present themselves. Currently, there is no real consequence for patients that miss or short cancel an appointment. Patients are almost rewarded by short cancelling or missing their appointments by being offered a subsequent appointment, sometimes as soon as the next business day. Often, patients are provided with three opportunities to miss an appointment before dismissal from the practice occurs. Patient dismissal is always used as a last resort and many patients are provided exceptions. A $40.00 unattended appointment fee is advised but not strictly enforced. Many patients are re-booked and then subsequently cancel upon short notice or fail to show up for their appointments. This is a common cycle among patients receiving public social assistance, but also among patients with private dental insurance. The underlying issue is patient devalue regarding the importance of their dental visit.

Three articles proved the odds of unattended appointments are significantly higher in patients aged 19-35 years compared to those 65 years and older.(1,4,5) Public patients are also twice as likely to miss appointments compared to patients with dental insurance.(1) Morning appointments receive higher rates of missed appointments than afternoons (4) and cancellations are almost twice as high on Fridays compared to Mondays.(1) Cancellations are almost two times higher regarding the last appointment of the day compared to the first.(1) This can be due to poor attendance rates of adolescents depending on their vacation/school hours.(4) Moreover, approximately 70% of patients cancel on the day of their appointment, compared to 17% of cancellations occurring the day
Re-formulating a new office policy will not only be practical, but produce a cost-effective analysis and significantly decrease patient short cancellation/unattended appointment occurrences.

**Top Reasons Patients Short Cancel/Unattended Dental Appointments**

Typically, a 10-20% rate reflection of unattended appointments within a dental practice is considered common. However, reasons for patients to cancel or miss appointments differ from practice to practice. Top reasons include lack of transportation, time, forgetfulness, practice location (urban or rural), socio-economic status, weather conditions and present oral health status. April, June and October are the months most associated with unattended patient appointments. In addition, current state of health, such as depression, anxiety and nervousness also play roles regarding missed dental appointments.

Gender and age also play important roles regarding missed appointments. Females more commonly cancel appointments, compared to males, with no difference related to gender for unattended appointments. According to age, sex and deprivation scores, combined high scores exist between young females, living in a deprived area. The city of Cornwall can be considered an area of deprivation, due to a large number of individuals reliant upon social assistance. It is therefore important that interventions be aimed towards this age group.

**Recommendations to Problem Solution**

- All patients asked of their method of confirmation preference at next visit
- Patients educated at each appointment of importance, especially hygiene
- All scheduled appointments confirmed the day prior by telephone, email or text message preference, along with a reminder of new office policy
- Patients receive a warning by mail or email in the form of a letter or verbally over the phone after first occurrence
- Patients are placed on a waitlist for a subsequent appointment when they short cancel or miss any appointment
- Patients incur a charge of $40.00 to their account after second occurrence
- Patients required to pay all fees on their account prior to any further appointment bookings and/or treatment
- Patients will receive a warning one month prior to dismissal and file deactivation, as a prompt to pay any unpaid fees
- Patient dismissal and file deactivation will occur upon failure to pay any fees added to an account within one year
References:


Bibliography


List of Illustrations:

1. Sharbin Dental Centre Logo: Available at: www.sharbindentalcentre.com