

Making the most of what you have

THE title of this piece sounds a bit like part of a sermon from a very “worthy” person extolling the virtues of appreciating everything that we are fortunate enough to have. Now, whilst I am by no means a preacher, I feel this sentiment can be very valuable to dental practitioners and is one worthy of deeper consideration.

Meeting patient needs

Taking care to ensure that you are meeting the needs of your patients is an important aspect of practice marketing at all times, but even more so currently, as patients continue to feel the economic ‘pinch’ and are liable to be making considered judgments as to the actual cost of their dental care and whether it represents value for money. Individuals are undoubtedly prioritising the use of their disposable income and private and mixed practices need to ensure that routine dental appointments, and therefore subsequent treatment plans, are not falling victim to the new cost-conscious consumer.

The reality of the ‘credit crunch’ atmosphere has been further exacerbated by patient perception of the cost of dentistry, a situation

intensified by recent news reports highlighting the “greed” of dentists, which have received national exposure. Despite vociferous arguments from the profession’s representatives that the blame for the state of the dental system lays with the Government and not with individual practitioners, the damage is done. Public perception is everything and dentists are unfortunately all tarred with the same brush.

So, in the light of this negative external environment, dental practices now, more than ever before, need to take care of their existing patients, giving them no reason to look for these services elsewhere. This means carefully considering how your dentistry is delivered and at what cost, while communicating with your patients at all levels.

Elective treatment volume

One of the clear differences in today’s dentistry, when compared to 20 or 30 years ago, is the sheer volume of elective treatment. Many private practices are founded on the provision of ‘cosmetic’ care and although there are practices delivering very complex and extensive treatments who may argue that they are immune from

When dental practices are looking to maintain their revenue, they should remember to not only look for new patients, but also to keep the ones they already have says **ANDREW WARREN...**

recessionary factors, there are many local practices offering good quality care, improving function and aesthetics for their patients, who may find that the take-up of whitening and other non-vital cosmetic treatments is suffering as a result of patients questioning their ‘need’ for such therapies. Taking time to carefully explain the benefits of treatments to patients can reap rewards not only in terms of immediate take-up, but also with regards to patient perception of you and your practice. Building relationships with patients will prove beneficial during the current short term challenges, but will also provide a solid foundation of loyal patients who will ensure that you are in a position to take advantage of the upturn when it inevitably arrives.

To safeguard revenues and reignite patient confidence in the provision of high quality care that is genuinely being delivered by the vast majority of practitioners, dentists need to transform themselves and their practices into organisations that are ‘solution-driven’. In

the same way that a dentist provides clinical solutions, they also need to present answers to their patient’s financial questions regarding any element of dental care. Dental payment plans are one method of keeping patients attending regularly, while helping to avoid the problems caused by routine appointments being skipped.

Long term view

Far from adding to patients’ financial burdens, at a time when most are looking to reduce rather than increase their monthly outgoings, a payment plan offers patients a means of safeguarding their general oral health, giving them peace of mind and confidence. Taking a long term view, now is not the time for patients to ditch routine care because they think they can’t afford it, in fact the reverse is true. Paying manageable monthly amounts is clearly more cost effective in the long run, as it ensures a good level of preventive care which will reduce the need for extensive and often costly

treatment that can result from neglect. Communicating this message in a clear, concise and very positive manner can prove highly beneficial for both the practice and patients.

Importance of communication

Consistent communication with your patients is important at any time, but in the current climate it takes on an even greater significance. A regular reminder of appointments, services and the way in which the practice is concerning itself with providing solutions tailored to the needs of patients, will also help their perception of you as a caring professional. ■

About the Author

Andrew Warren has more than 40 years’ experience in private dentistry and as part of the original team that set up dental payment plans more than 20 years ago, he developed a deep understanding of the challenges facing the sector. As one of the founders of DPAS, sales director Andrew Warren is helping to lead DPAS in its support of practices introducing independent, practice branded payment plan services.

