

Realize the Opportunity for Advancement

Continuing education is necessary to achieve and sustain optimal therapeutic outcomes in the nonsurgical management of periodontal diseases. That's because the conventional dental hygienist is not educated to treat the biological model of periodontal disease.

The American Academy of Periodontology (AAP; www.perio.org) has established a vision for the year 2020. This vision, Vision 2020, recognizes that general dentists and hygienists should be evaluating and managing most slight-to-moderate cases of periodontal disease. The AAP also acknowledges the importance of increasing the education of hygienists so they can fulfill this role.

Periodontics recognizes that knowledge based on scientific evidence is the most valuable. However, it has been difficult to distribute information not just to undergraduates but also to professionals already in practice. The rate of new research findings related to periodontal therapeutics and the transfer of those findings to the clinical practice are exponential.

Many of today's graduates leave school with an information gap. For most seasoned clinicians practicing in a general dental practitioner's office, it's virtually impossible to keep up with all of the new research. In most cases, determining

what clinical research is valid and which products have the strongest scientific support of efficacy is a daunting exercise.

The following are a number of ways periodontal therapists can advance their education:

- **Read articles in leading scientific and peer-reviewed journals.** Rotating the responsibility for reviewing and disseminating the research among members of your clinical staff is a valuable way to increase knowledge and collaboration.

- **Attend annual sessions of the AAP.** In September 2003, the AAP held its first one-day symposium specifically designed for the dental hygiene professional. It was well attended. In fact, it's not unusual for hygienists who practice periodontal therapy to attend the AAP's annual continuing education courses.

- **Attend university lectures.** Here, you'll find leading-edge educators discussing the scientific evidence of

various treatment modalities. You should seek out speakers that present unbiased views of products and disclose commercial support when appropriate. While a continuing education day course is very affordable, it's often limited. For example, presentations are not reinforced when participants simply look at presentation slides without a clinical immersion

experience. In addition, sometimes course participants have difficulty transferring the information they gain during a single-day course into everyday practice. In these cases, in-office education is a great supplement to single-day courses and can serve as "training wheels" in jump-starting a strong clinical pathway.

- **Participate in in-office continuing education programs.** Programs such as PointPerio's in-office continuing education program provide evidence-based curriculum, hands-on training by a clinical education specialist, and over-the-shoulder tutoring. Educational consulting groups that specialize in the application of evidence-based nonsurgical periodontal therapy rather than the promotion of practice optimization strategies—which are often business-related—have a strong clinical orientation. This level of clinical intensity provides a number of advantages, including a focused, hands-on education that is specifically designed to develop hygienists' expertise in diagnostics, treatment planning, case presentation, and the technical aspects of periodontics.

More and more dentists are starting to discover that hygienists, who excel as periodontal therapists as a result of their advanced training and education, significantly increase a practice's profitability. In fact, dentists readily admit that the return on investment from their hygiene department has been dramatic. So, is it time for you to start thinking about this kind of solid growth strategy for your own dental practice? ●



Casey Hein is the founder and president of PointPerio, a clinical educational firm based in Arnold, Md. In addition to her work as a clinical educator, she lectures nationally on the role of the periodontal therapist, writes a monthly column, "Perio Pathways," for *Contemporary Oral Hygiene*, and publishes personal case studies. She welcomes questions or comments at 410-349-2830 or www.pointperio.com.

Communicate Effectively with Patients

Failure to listen, hear, and respond appropriately to what your patient is saying is the number-one complaint received in offices across the country. Getting things started on the right foot is very helpful. A skilled team member can gather pertinent information in less than 5 to 10 minutes in the initial phone call. Consider some of the following areas that are critical in determining your patient's experience:

New patient profile. In addition to the obvious information needed from your patient, a new patient profile document should include at least the following information:

- Type of appointment requested
- Questions they have about your practice or services
- Previous dental experiences

Referral information. Get a grasp of what your patient is like through their referral. Inquire about the following:

- Preferred method of payment
- Insurance carrier, verified prior to their appointment
- How they like to be addressed (eg, Mr., Ms., Dr., etc)

- **Best way to contact them**
- **Listening skills.** Identifying communication styles provides insight into expectations or possible fears, and helps to put your patient at ease about the care they're receiving. Talk with your patient in outlining their care. Share with them the methods of contact for your practice as well as a brief explanation of what they should expect in your office.

Explain that your office appreciates a mutual respect of time. Some offices choose not to discuss cancellation policies, thinking that this can lead the patient to think that it is routine to cancel appointments. However, stated correctly, this is an important piece of information to disclose to your patient.

Inform a new patient to expect a welcoming packet containing additional information about your practice as well as information necessary to complete prior to their visit.

What exactly are your patients looking for when they visit your office? When they meet you for the first time, be sure to place careful attention on

your initial contact. That way, at each visit, patient expectations should be clear before they arrive at your office.

Make sure that the physical appearance of your office is what they expect. Maintain the exterior and interior. Both should be neat, clean, updated, and inviting, as if it were your own home.

Have team members welcome your patients to your office. Ask your staff to offer refreshments. If you can, give patients a personal tour of your facility and introduce them to each of the office's team members.

Greet each patient on time. Engage in conversation focused on them, including their questions or concerns, family information, past experiences, etc. *Remember:* Some people do not like to talk about their personal life, so ask open-ended questions about other things. Ask if there is anything they would like to privately talk about with you.

Before dismissing the patient, always ask if there are any other clinical questions they might need answered. When the visit is wrapping up, thank

them and invite them back to your office. Review and collect fees due for that visit; discuss the process for their next visit, including the estimated time and fees; and schedule accordingly.

Ask your patient to complete a brief questionnaire about their visit. Also ask for referrals as well as permission to contact them for additional information. Monitor the responses regularly and send a thank you note for visiting your office and completing the feedback form.

Wear your smile, encourage communication and feedback, be prepared for each visit, listen carefully, educate patients continually, and thank them for being a part of your day. A positive attitude is contagious. ●



Gina McMeans has more than 10 years of experience in the dental field. Through a strength-based methodology, she has proven results in counseling and coaching, specializing in conflict solutions, team building, and personal and professional growth coaching. To schedule your complimentary consultation, call 866-626-3267 or 480-451-1278 or e-mail glm@themcmeansgroup.com.