

Aspects of clinical excellence: Operational efficiency

Overseeing clinical continuing education courses that feature patient care gives one the opportunity to observe numerous dentists and their staff at work. Discussions with these dental teams reveal all levels of education, training, and utilization of efficiencies in dental practice. The range of knowledge and its use by CE participants is extreme.

In the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, a few schools and texts dominated the development of operating efficiency, or work simplification, in the dental environment. The advent of the high-speed handpiece allowed dental procedures to be accomplished faster than ever before, and the profession began to appreciate that in a normal 8-hour workday there are only 28,800 seconds available in which to accomplish the demands of that day.

The "work smarter, not harder" philosophy emerged in the form of work simplification: *simplify* procedures by eliminating redundancy in equipment, steps, materials, motions, and instrumentation; *combine* those elements into efficient sequences and stages; *rearrange* those elements for maximum comfort and efficiency.

It is rare to find a school today where these principles are widely taught, and yet the need for such practices in modern dental offices has never been greater. Crowded curricula at the dental schools of the world tend to push aside everything but the most fundamental clinical and didactic materials. Fewer and fewer teachers in dental schools have had extensive private practice experience using comprehensive, well-integrated work-simplification approaches, and so the concept of 4-, 6-, and even 8-handed, sit-down, intensively assisted dental and dental hygiene practice is alien to increasing numbers of dental graduates.

At the same time, the demands of today's dental practice include increased productivity, decreased stress, enhanced patient and staff protection, and a comfortable work environment. The ideal answer to those demands, in health practices as well as industry, is applied ergonomics and work-simplification schema.

Ergonomics is broadly defined as the physical relationship between people and their environment. Work simplification deals with occupational ergonomics. The correct use of established work-simplification principles in dental practice produces increased quality, efficiency, production, comfort, and satisfaction for the dental team and the patients they serve.

Understanding the core principles of increased prac-

tice efficiency is the first step to developing one's own office policies, procedures, and training. The second step is to be sure the proper equipment, instruments, and materials are in place. The last step is to begin using and refining those core principles.

The core principles of work simplification in the dental office are:

1. Patients must be in the supine position with headrests and back and arm supports comfortably adjusted, and protective drapes, wraps, dams, and bibs correctly placed.
2. The operating team must be seated comfortably in ergonomically sound positions and must maintain the maximum level of comfort and ergonomic practices at all times.
3. All equipment, instruments, and materials necessary for the procedure(s) to be completed on that particular patient must be out in preset trays, easily reachable, and sequenced as they are most likely to be used.
4. Preset trays with instruments and materials for possible unforeseen procedures must be instantly available to the operating team.
5. All staff, both chairside and supportive, must be fully trained in all legally assignable duties and must perform them appropriately at all times in each procedure.
6. A comprehensive, sequential treatment plan for the patient must be in place and agreed to, including how you will handle possible unforeseen circumstances.
7. The operating team must be aware of and employ motion economy at all possible times.
8. Appropriate infection-control practices must be employed at all times.

There are many other details, elaborations, and aspects of work efficiency and simplification in dentistry, but those listed above are a good start.

The bottom line is simple: A coordinated dental team with a planned approach to each day maximizes efficiency and minimizes fatigue and stress. It's a wonderful way to practice!

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