Patient expectations are changing

By Gary Smith, Melbourne

Business as it stands today is fast and ever-changing. Trying to build a more sustainable business while just keeping our heads above water is at times somewhat challenging and time-consuming task. It is even more difficult if we do not understand the basic principles of practice management.

Our health care industry is currently under tremendous pressure from the government, as well as the public and private sectors, to improve health care access and control escalating costs. Changes in legislation, regulations and reimbursement options are forcing our health care industry to address and address these issues. The delivery of health care is a business and, as such, is subject to the same market factors, risks and constraints as other service industries, which require sound business principles and techniques to survive and thrive.

What is shaping your future as a small or medium enterprise in dentistry? Besides changing dental practice patterns owing to governmental and private insurers’ influences, it is new autonomies, as well as patients’ demands and expectations. In the changing world in which we live at both work and play, we are continually challenged to develop new ideas to ensure that we sustain a working environment that will benefit all financially and emotionally.

So where does the role of practice management fit into your daily life as a clinician? The role of practice management in your practice may be evolving and will require specific skills and knowledge to keep pace with the future. There are two types of knowledge we need to either acquire or learn: foundation knowledge and currency knowledge. Foundation knowledge is the acquiring of base knowledge concerning practice management. Your role in your practice has evolved and it will continue to evolve but will require specific skills and knowledge to keep pace with the ever-emerging external influences upon us. Currency knowledge is the information we require on a daily basis that influences us to make informed decisions on the running of our business. Without this type of knowledge, we cannot make these decisions, which may have either a positive or a negative impact on the business we manage.

Despite the tremendous advances in technology over the years, we should still continue to thirst for education and information. The legendary American baseball pitcher, Satchel Paige, once counselled the public with these words, “Don’t look back; someone may be gaining on you.” Without education, we will lose ground. The gaining of knowledge sets the blueprint for us to chart our own destiny. The skills needed in the past to be a successful owner/employer are not going to be adequate for the future. With the rapid evolution of health care practice management, successful practices, multidisciplinary teams of course all those new government compliance requirements and private health insurers’ products, we are going to have to be at the cutting edge, and in many cases develop entirely new sets of skills, to cope with the environment we will be facing in the next number of years. These include risk management, productivity management, e-commerce, clinical services management and accreditation.

There are key areas for the person who is to manage the practice. This person is known as the practice manager. Associated with this developing role of practice manager, or the person performing the management role, are a number of responsibilities (Fig. 1). The time devoted to each of these responsibilities will vary, depending on the requirements of the practice at specific times; however, all will be performed at some stage.

Practice management is about having to learn to use new tools and gather information that may or may not be currently on the horizon. The phrase “we don’t know what we don’t know” is very apt when it comes to practice management because generally in the health environment practice management is a new horizon. Practice management is a major force in allowing you to chart your own destiny. I ask you whether you can do it by yourself?

An experienced sailor once told me that you cannot navigate without a charted course. The ocean is too vast, too immense and too unforgiving. The same is true for our future. A fulfilling, rewarding profession is on the horizon, but without a map and a compass, we might sail right pass it. Over the past ten years, there has been a paradigm shift in health care. No longer is it good enough to simply be a great dentist. Today’s patients expect to receive excellence in health care and health consumers are increasingly raising the bar when it comes to what they expect from their health providers, such as the level of service competing with the demands of a payment/reimbursement system. Similarly, the concept of a practice manager adding value to a health care practice has been increasingly recognised as an essential component in the formula for the successful operation of any health related business.

Today, practice managers undertake a wide range of practice management responsibilities, including human resources management, financial management, compliance, the patient journey, risk management and marketing. If you have professional, well-educated staff who are aware of the fundamentals of practice management and are looking after those aspects of your practice then congratulations: you are well on your way to meeting your patients’ expectations of what they consider to be excellence in health care.

Now more than ever, practice managers are charged with the responsibility of reviewing and implementing processes in practices to increase efficiency and contribute to patients’ overall experience of excellence in health care. But, just like your clinical skills, practice management skills need to be continually refined through a combination of ongoing education, understanding of your health care discipline environment and the application of skills learnt on a daily basis. Remember, practice management is not my job; it is my profession.

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