



Your Team Is a Critical Link to Helping Patients Value, Schedule and Keep Preventive Appointments

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Your hygiene department can and should be a central and critical component of your practice's success. Your hygiene department should be strengthening patient relationships, be a constant source of new patient referrals and help create a healthy physical foundation for clinical treatment. They should also add to your bottom line by producing three times their compensation and by actively presenting potential production identified during the preventive appointment.

Before we dive into how to optimize your hygiene department, I recommend you take a minute to find out what they should be producing.

Your Hygiene Department Compensation \$ _____

X3

First Level of Profitability Goal \$ _____

As you can see from your practice's perspective, dental hygiene/preventive appointments are extremely valuable. Unfortunately, many patients don't share that same perspective. In fact, many believe that hygiene appointments are "just cleanings" and they will be just fine if they delay or cancel them.

To change patients' perspectives on preventive appointments, we need to change the conversation – internally and externally.

The Internal Conversation

We have all heard anecdotes about the dental team member who projected her own internal beliefs into patient conversations, either through her body language, tone of voice or actual words. Because she wouldn't choose to invest in her smile beyond baseline health and maintenance, she was uncomfortable encouraging patients to accept recommended dentistry, especially when there was a financial investment.

As the dentist, you know how much your patients look to your team for reassurance and recommendations – even when it comes to hygiene preventive appointments. When Mrs. Jones asks, "Do I really need to come back in six months for another cleaning?" the way your team member responds will either communicate the value of preventive care or not. Or, when Mr. Smith calls the day before his preventive appointment to cancel, the way your team manages the call will often be the difference in the patient keeping the appointment or putting it off. Before your team can communicate the value, they must understand and believe that preventive appointments are important to the patient and practice.

Just as technology and dentistry have evolved rapidly over the past decade, so has hygiene. Some of your team may be unaware of, or not fully understand, hygiene's role in the practice and its impact on patients' oral and overall health. When they do, it can change the internal conversation.

Here are a few things they should know but may not be fully aware of:

- next to the doctor, the hygienist is often the most educated professional in the practice
- in all states except one, hygienists must go through, at a minimum, a two-year accredited program, study anatomy, physiology, chemistry, pharmacology and get an associate's degree
- hygienists must pass a full-day written national board exam on all systems of the body and pass a state and/or regional clinical board exam
- good oral health starts in hygiene; good overall health is connected to good oral health
- preventive appointments are not "just cleanings" – they include a complete evaluation of the health of gum, teeth and bone, oral cancer screening, early detection of decay, disease and other dental issues that enable the dentist to diagnose treatment
- good hygiene can set the foundation for successful clinical dentistry
- how frequently a patient needs to have a preventive appointment depends upon their oral health status

Once the team knows the role of hygiene, it's easier for them to see the value, so that everyone can change the external dialogue with patients.

The External Conversation

It's important that your patients hear a consistent value narrative from each member of the team when preventive

hygiene is discussed. The language your team uses should begin to make a perception shift in the minds of patients who also may not fully understand the value of the appointment. Of course, you don't want to make the dialogue too complicated or confusing, but you do want to clearly communicate value. For example, using the words "hygiene appointment" communicates cleaning, while "preventive appointment" or "oral wellness exam" communicates a much different type of care and benefit to the patient. These word choices should be consistently used by all members of your team and communicated to patients early and often.

One way you can help your team change the external conversation and begin consistently communicating the true value of the preventive appointment is by providing them with real-life examples and scripting. Compliments of CareCredit, I am making available *Preventive Appointment Communication Strategies + Scripts* that includes dialogues for:

- scheduling preventive appointments with new and existing patients
- verifying scheduled appointments
- managing cancellation requests



To order, call
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option 1, then 6.

It takes a team effort and consistent communication, both internally and externally, at each patient appointment to help them understand the value of preventive care. When patients know that it's not "just a cleaning," fewer patients will be likely to delay or fail their appointments.



About the Author: Rachel Wall, RDH, BS, and CEO of Inspired Hygiene, serves the dental community as a hygiene consultant and speaker. Rachel coaches dental teams to build highly productive hygiene departments by creating and implementing systems for high quality periodontal care, enrolling restorative care through hygiene and managing the logistics of a high performance hygiene department.

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