

It's time to **CHANGE** the **CONVERSATION!**



BY ANDREA GREER, RDH, BS

There is a great deal of noise in dentistry. The noise of human resources and regulatory agencies; the noise from misinformation found on the internet and patients attempting to dictate how you practice dentistry; and loudest of all, the noise from insurance companies dictating dental care through denials, reduced benefits, reduced fee schedules, etc. Sadly, it seems that somewhere along the way, dentistry got distracted and lost sight of its value. The result is that dental care remains a low priority in many homes and families. It seems almost everything is valued over dental care when it comes to household expenses and our biggest competition is the discretionary dollars a family has to spend.

But this is also an exciting time for dentistry! Astounding science emerges almost daily, and the technology coming in the next several years will be life changing. I can't imagine being in any other industry. The challenge is getting the public to accept this brave new world of oral care when we struggle to get them to accept a recommended crown or commit to regular hygiene care.

I speak with team members who are frustrated with their patient family because they don't accept treatment or cancel appointments and yet, when I listen to the conversations they are having with patients in the office, I am not surprised at all. I hear all kinds of conversations about children, sports, and the latest celebrity gossip, but little about oral cancer statistics, or the oral systemic link, and rarely

is an intraoral photo taken. Doctors neglect to build value for their team members or slow down to show the patient a picture of the condition that has been diagnosed. Insurance is discussed in terms that build up its importance and value – its almost as if a practice says they would not dream of doing the work without permission first!

I ask them: how will the patient change their perception of the importance of dentistry and how it relates to oral health if you say nothing different than what you have said in the past? I say that it is time to change the conversation with the patients! It starts with us: everything we do and say needs to be building value for what we do! You and your team influence the perception of dentistry in your patient family's eyes.

Development of workflows, protocols and systems will increase profitability and reduce stress. But are you taking it to the next level? By changing the conversation, you have opportunity to build value for these workflows and systems, which will lead to increased value for dentistry. While there are many openings every day to implement these discussions, here are just 3 key conversations that you and your team have the power to change.

Change the conversation about your time.

When patients dictate when they come into the practice, the value of your time is decreased. It may feel like good customer service to be accommodating, and to a degree that is true. However, in creating a schedule that is ideal for you and your team,

you always bring your 'A' game to your patient. **Decide how you want to work. Be strategic in your plan. Then, invest in training the entire team how to direct patients into those ideal times that you want, and to help them understand that this allows you to care for them in the best way possible.** Patients respond quite well because they understand they are receiving the best you have to offer.

The business team can build value for the schedule by changing the late cancellation conversation. Through excellent communication they can train the patient family they will not be able to reschedule for some time if they cancel their appointment. It's the idea of supply vs. demand at work in the dental practice. **Scarcity breeds value.** Of course, this also means that you as a team must commit to respecting your patients' time: you can't run behind in your schedule. If you have built your ideal day, that should only occur when the unpredictable happens.

Let's change the conversation in the hygiene room.

There are so many traps doctors and hygienists fall into that devalue the hygiene appointment. **If your business team hears on the phone that a patient needs to**

reschedule because, well, "it's just a cleaning!" you can be sure that the conversation needs to change. Run on time, use the entire appointment time allotted (minus room turnover), and focus on patient education. Utilize the intraoral camera at every appointment and involve the patient with this evaluation. **The hygienist must explain what she is looking for with pocket depths and bleeding before she does every perio evaluation and share oral cancer statistics while she is screening the tissue.**

These things need to be done repeatedly. Not just once or occasionally, but **every time.**

Develop a strong handoff between the hygienist and the doctor, and then deliver it with intention. Doctors tend to glove up and jump right into the patient's mouth, or they greet the patient by asking personal questions and how everything is going. Instead, change the conversation: **greet the patient succinctly, then ask the hygienist how the appointment went today.** Allow her to summarize what she found, what radiographs and photos she took, and what treatment she pre-heated the patient for. Wait until the exchange is complete before looking at the photos or x-rays or beginning your evaluation. Thank the hygienist for taking the diagnostics, compliment her proficiency. **Reinforce the education she delivered and**

the recommendations that she made regarding perio therapy, the recare interval, and future diagnostics. If she correctly pre-heated the patient for a possible treatment recommendation, let the patient know that she was correct and that you appreciate her expertise. **You are sending the message to the patient that what she does and says is important.**

Finally, it's time to change the insurance conversation.

Arguably, this is the most important and most difficult conversation to alter. First, your entire team must understand what insurance is and what it isn't. When working in a practice, I will often give a five minute history lesson about insurance because it is important to understand how it evolved. I find this knowledge will transform the insurance focused team. Imagine how it could impact your patient family.

This is not to say that dental benefits can't be helpful, and I believe that teams should be knowledgeable about them, and they must be entered accurately into the practice management software, even if you are fee for service. But I also believe that **this information in your system is for your benefit, not your patients'.** Its purpose is so the financial coordinator can have

an informed conversation with the patient. The word 'estimate' and broken-down benefits are viewed by the patient as '100% accurate and guaranteed'.

Many practices have success explaining the treatment, tying it to the patient's goals and desires, and presenting a single number, which is the total for the plan. Only then is the insurance piece brought into the conversation.

I often hear clinical team members, including doctors, bring insurance into treatment presentation. I hear offers of pre-determinations and possible coverage in the same breath as the treatment needed – this only sends a message that

- a) we need permission, or
- b) since there is coverage, we have permission.

If the patient brings it up, hand the conversation off to your expert in the practice. [Take this opportunity to build value for your business team members and focus on the treatment.](#)

Dentistry has come so far over the last 60 years: many people understand that dental disease is preventable, and a nice smile is desirable. But we still have a ways to go: patients sometimes still expect to lose teeth because their parents did, and they prioritize vacations, pets and possessions over their own health. Many doctors have excellent communication

with their patient family and have built amazing value to their patients. I submit these doctors decided long ago to change the conversation and adopted the workflows, systems and talking points that build value for dentistry. And I hope that many more doctors will continue to take up the challenge and provide the dentistry they want to provide, in a practice that they love coming to every day.

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We have the
power to
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—”—



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Over her 25 years of experience in the dental industry, Andrea Greer has led practices from many positions: dental assistant, hygienist, office manager, Dentrix trainer, practice management consultant and speaker. Founder of On Point Dental Consulting, she approaches her work with each practice uniquely to develop protocols and workflows to reduce stress and advance patient communication. Andrea is passionate about helping dentists and their teams believe in what they are providing to the patient family and realize contentment and purpose. Her gift of connection and empathy is a key element in engaging with audience members, as well as developing leadership one on one with her clients.

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