



REVIEW ARTICLE

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SKILLS: HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL PRACTITIONER

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ABSTRACT

Completing graduation or post-graduation in any field of dentistry does not make the dentist a good clinician. Some additional skills are required apart from the theoretical and practical knowledge to be a successful dental professional. In this article, the authors have described a few of these skills. It is important that skills which enhance the practice management in a practitioner, like time management, self development and organization skills are included in the dental curriculum (BDS: Bachelor of Dental Surgery; and MDS: Master of Dental Surgery). The institution should help generate dentists that are not only good at their work, but also imbibe a set of skills and personalities that help them achieve success as a good practitioner and a well-equipped human being.

INTRODUCTION

In a country like India, that produces over 30000 dentists a year (Jain *et al.*, 2012); it is extremely difficult but important to stand out. Books can only teach you so much. There are so many traits and skills one has to learn and imbibe to be able to practice efficiently. These include what are known as Practice Management skills. If the formal and personality development training for improving practice management skills are given to a Practice Learner, he can develop good rapport and communication skills with any patient of dental need. The Practice Learner will gain confidence in practicing dentistry much better.

DISCUSSION

In order to cultivate these skills in oneself, one has to ask the following questions and find answers:

1. How to communicate/develop good rapport with patients?
2. How to behave in front of patients and their family?
3. How to explain and present the diagnosis and treatment plan to the patient in a simplified manner?
4. How to make patients comfortable with his present situation and reduce anxiety without scaring them?
5. How to ensure positive cooperation from patient?

6. How to initiate conversation with the patient and his relative for making formalities such as taking consent and filling the case paper?
7. How to create a positive environment in the clinic and patients' waiting area?
8. What to do in case of an emergency?
9. What to do when you're not sure of a procedure or a diagnosis?
10. How to achieve coordination with other medical and dental health professionals?
11. How to organize operatory and patient preparation in clinics?
12. How to improve oration skill with all team members?
13. How to deliver best clinical skills to the patient?
14. How to bring smile on patients face after treatment?
15. How to maintain follow up visits and recall as a good clinician?
16. How to create a professional attitude?
17. How to treat a patient as a whole? (Elangovan *et al.*, 2010)

When one is able to answer all these questions, only then will he be on a correct and effective path to practice management. One often is unable to answer all these questions due to his or her own shortcomings or that of the dental institution and training. In any medical or dental institution, application of knowledge is limited to passing and scoring in the exams only. When interns or any post-graduate doctor passes out from his educational institution, he often has a bitter experience in his practicing area because of many factors like-

1. He had never treated patients in a professional manner in college life.
2. He has no knowledge of practice area of his specialty in new acquired places of shifting or settlement.
3. Learner had created a wrong illusion of his role model, to behave and become like him.
4. He had not experienced real practice scenario outside the Institution.
5. Somebody (parents, teachers or colleagues, role model) had influenced his mind that academics and job in the only option suitable for him.
6. Fear of future has conquered the mind of Practice Learner to make him unstable, in respect to sustain in starting practice.
7. Failure of realistic approach in starting practices senses wrong feeling of starting practice.
8. Past experiences with patients makes learner uncomfortable to start new practice.
9. Financial crisis of other colleagues and future burden of family and existence demoralizes Practice Learner to start new practice.
10. Lack of practice-based research network. (Davis *et al.*, 2012)
11. Feeling of incompetency in practices and fear of competition survival make the situation worst to initiate positive practice behaviour.
12. Job dependency factor of senior practitioner creates additional fear in mind of new Practice Learner.
13. Lack of interdisciplinary treatment and problem-based learning. (Thammasitboon *et al.*, 2007)

In order to overcome these obstacles, the dental graduate and post graduate training should include personality development (personal and professional) as part of their programme. It should guide the student and teach him crucial points that will enhance his growth as a doctor and even as a person. The following are such important skill sets one ought to inculcate:

1. Continued Self Development Skill

Personality development, not only as a practitioner but also as a human being is a requisite to succeed in life. One of the most important ways to achieve this is to compete with yourself instead of others (Gadbury-Amyot *et al.*, 2015). Compare yourself with what you were yesterday. Make a self-performance review (Cruz 2006). Compare your work with that in the past. Constantly push yourself ahead. Read books, articles, journals. One should keep oneself updated, attend CDE programs. Meeting new people and finding new hobbies that interest you are other such ways.

2. Organisation skills

It is necessary to organise oneself. A practitioner should prioritize things. He should know what is more important and what can be given less importance so that he does not stress himself much. He should be able to not let personal and professional aspects of his life intermingle and affect one another. Moreover, one's clinic should be well-organised. Records should be well maintained. Back-up of digital data should be taken regularly. Duties should be allotted to the technical staff. The staff should be organized for positive reinforcement. One should keep a check on the armamentarium, and that the material stock is replenished from

time to time. Apart from all of this, a constant check on one's finances and expenditure is a very critical aspect too.

3. Time management skills

To be more efficient at one's work, one should follow practice management schedules (Durak *et al.*, 2006). Make time tables and strictly adhere to it. Advocating a particular routine sets one mind to a particular rhythm and may enhance the work output. For example, dividing your work according to type at a particular time - bracket bonding appointments in the morning, wire changing appointments in the evening and so on and so forth. No shortcuts should be taken even if there is shortage of time. Assistants should be instructed to remind you about the patient flow and in case too many patients are waiting in the waiting room. Just how the doctor is making efforts to adhere to the appointment schedule, the patients might get inspired to do the same, and if not must be constantly reminded to do so. Various softwares are available these days that simplify the work of the doctor by a constant reminder of the patient and their payment schedule.

4. Oration skills improvisation in practicing area

For effective oration skills, one should use grammar and learn the vernacular language of the practicing area. Communicating in a language that is most relatable to the patient will have a stronger impact. While speaking, be confident, reflect a positive personality and do not impose opinions upon the patients. To improve one's public speaking skills, one should regularly present posters, papers and seminars at conferences.

5. Learning of hard skills and soft skill

Hard skills-

Patients always appreciate a doctor whose hard core dentistry skills are good and gentle. For this, the doctor must empathize with the patient and treat everyone with utmost care. Good and sharp instruments should be used. There should be no compromise on the quality of the armamentarium. Take help of assistants whenever required. Follow "four-handed or even "six-handed" dentistry to maximize your work efficiency. Keep yourself updated with recent events and technological advances. The goal of these advances is usually to simplify work and hence one should adapt to these changes. The doctor can work more efficiently if he is less fatigued and physically fit. Following sound ergonomic principles make the doctor less stressed physically and optimises work quality.

Soft skills-

They say, "A good start is half the battle won." Similarly, having a good first impression on the patient is crucial. The patient should be impressed enough by the doctor to get his treatment done from him only. This can be achieved via articulate soft skills. Be courteous. Use magic words, "Please", "Thank you", "Welcome". Not only is it important to know what and how to speak, it is equally important to know what not to. A two-way dialogue and making the patient a part of the conversation can go a long way. Workshops and seminars on communication skills should be attended (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2015). Basic and advanced training program for improving teaching and soft skills will give one an edge over others (Henzi *et al.*, 2006). A special soft skill training

program for assistants should be implemented. Equal weightage should be given to non-verbal communication, like a pat on the back or a handshake. One should also be aware of 'brand assessment and development' and work towards it. Digital media via websites and blogs are the latest portals of connecting to the mass.

6. Improving optimistic behavior as a doctor

As a good practitioner, one should not panic if something goes wrong. Be reassuring to the patient, be confident. Do not experiment something on the patient you're not sure of. Let you and the patient, both be aware of your limitations to define the scope of your treatment. One can only be a happy doctor, if he is happy in life. Meditate, attend personality development workshops, exercise. It is important to give back to the masses. Doing charity now and then might make you feel good about yourself. Taking care of your finances is also important. Knowing when and how much to increase the treatment cost with experience and age is reflective in a good practitioner.

7. Acquisition of disciplinary nature for working in symbiosis

It is very important to create a happy work place. Select your team carefully. Ensure they develop a positive attitude towards work and patients just as much as you. Be honest and work hard. One should not bad-mouth other professionals from the same field. For the welfare of the patient, consult for opinions from other medical and dental professionals. One should not be ashamed to take help of other dental professionals from the same background if one is unsure of the diagnosis and treatment.

8. Knowledge of utilization skills

There should be enough manpower in the clinic to keep things working smoothly. A proper manpower ratio would make work much less cumbersome. Infrastructure maintenance and utilization is must. A patient will be impressed by a tidy, clean and spacious clinic that is well-managed. One should keep a tab on the utilization of finances for the running of clinic, setting up new ones. One should acquire the knowledge to know where and when to invest.

9. Following biomedical ethics

Being good at your job is sometimes not good enough. In addition, most importantly is being a good person; being ethical (Chaves *et al.*, 2001), (Gillon 1994). The Hippocratic Oath and Nuremberg code are to be respected. You may be good at root canal therapy, but knowing that a restoration shall suffice the treatment and actually following it is what separates you from a dishonest dentist. The patient's complaint ought to be addressed and should always be prioritized and given justice to before your own greed, either monetary or the need to experiment without sound knowledge. Being able to live yourself with your head held high knowing you have given your best is far important than buying a lavish sports car.

10. Acquisition of new technique skill

This is an extremely important facet for the growth of any practitioner. To survive in this competitive world, one must constantly polish one's skills. This can be done by attending

conferences and conventions as well as by reading the latest articles, journals, books. Be open-minded and creative, invent newer appliances and techniques. One should not hesitate to learn something new. Be passionate about your work. The desire to learn different things can be catalyzed by following other medical and dental professionals from other parts of the world. Various other features include patent acquisition, making affordable appliances and collaboration with international universities.

Conclusion

A dentist who is skilled with such knowledge will definitely have an edge over someone who has just theoretical knowledge of the same. The goal should be getting oneself trained as critical-thinkers, solution-finders, lifelong-learners, and ethical practitioners, skillful in peer and self-assessment, and cognizant of the psychosocial and biomedical perspective of health and disease (Lantz *et al.*, 1997). The ultimate aim of any dental health professional to be a successful practitioner can be achieved if the above are incorporated as a part of the graduation or post-graduation training program in dental institutions (DePaola *et al.*, 2004; DePaola 2008). It would also save them a lot of time and difficulty, having to learn them after they finish their course and start practicing in the real world. A dentist equipped with all these qualities will be a much better clinician. He will not only be able to perform a better job, but also make sure his patients and staffs have full confidence in him.

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