

Dental Health Educator— A Key to Professional Service and Marketing

The Dental Health Educator is the communications coordinator for the practice. In a preventive-oriented office she/he teaches patients how to prevent dental disease and motivates them to maintain self-care. The Educator is also an ambassador for the practice, a resource for dental health education and educational materials distributed community-wide.

The DHE has three areas of responsibility and activity:

- patient relations
- staff relations
- community-wide education

Patient Relations

The primary responsibility of the DHE is interacting with patients, communicating, teaching, caring, empathizing, and helping to establish the long term trust relationship necessary to keep patients active in the practice. She/he instructs patients about preventing dental disease and improving their own oral health. Traditional instruction which includes plaque disclosure, brushing and flossing techniques, and use of fluoride are important, but do not constitute the whole patient education program.

Patients may need more detailed information about diet, pre-natal and neo-natal maternal and infant oral health, sealants, the benefits of esthetic dentistry, periodontal treatment, prosthetic devices, orthodontics, and so on. The DHE can answer questions and reinforce the diagnosis and case presentation made by the dentist, frequently prompting patient acceptance of prescribed treatment. The DHE can keep paperwork current. She/he can order supplies for the preventive education program and patient giveaways. If skilled in writing, she/he can create a practice brochure, write pamphlets about home care instructions and the benefits of infant oral health, assemble informational pieces about diet, sealants, bleaching, etc. She/he may oversee the website for the practice, keeping it current, attractive, and informative. She/he can also post to online media sites.

Communications with patients can be coordinated by the DHE — welcome letters mailed before the all-important first appointment, cards or emails to patients for special occasions, referral thank-you notes, practice newsletters — all are excellent ways to say, "We care" to patients. The task of responding to patient compliments or complaints can be the DHE's responsibility, and she/he can follow up with patients who leave the office without scheduling an appointment for diagnosed treatment. As the DHE builds rapport with patients, she/he is working to maintain that close personal relationship that is a golden tie between each patient and the successful practice.

Staff Relations

The DHE can enhance the practice by coordinating staff activities and facilitating or, when necessary, mediating staff interactions. She/he can plan staff meetings, assuring follow-up of ideas generated; schedule group social occasions, family outings and such; and coordinate continuing education requirements and events for the entire staff. The DHE can maintain PowerPoint presentations, lecture and meeting notes, books, journals and CDs for articles or lectures the dentist may write or present and for staff in-service training. Selecting worthwhile continuing education courses and dental meetings for staff to attend can help maintain a viable practice. Alerting the staff to new concepts in preventive dentistry or journal articles about new methods, materials, and the latest research can help improve professional skills.

The Educator can be a helpmate to the entire staff, including the dentist, a "big ear" to listen to ideas and problems and a "small mouth" to keep confidences. The DHE can be the "cheerleader" for the group, inspiring optimism and enthusiasm about the profession and the office. Perhaps the DHE can administer a "fun budget", a modest amount of money used monthly for treats for staff, a rose for everyone at the end of a trying day or week, an ice cream dessert at lunch, a prize for some type of in-office contest such as "Who can generate the most useful, innovative ideas to improve the practice?" The DHE can, in short, act as a catalyst to coordinate staff professional growth opportunities, fun activities, and harmonious interaction. Remember, the most productive offices are those in which staffs feel they are important, appreciated, and growing professionally as part of a fun, enjoyable work team.

Community-Wide Education

Once the patient and staff relations described above are organized and underway in the practice, the DHE can become more involved in the community. At this point, she/he becomes the external marketing coordinator for the practice, expanding the role to include efforts that will serve the populace-at-large. DHE tasks should be two-fold: (1) educating people about maintenance of oral health and (2) posturing her/his particular office as a reservoir of caring, concerned dentist(s) and staff members seeking to serve their patients and community. By the very nature of these efforts, the community-wide profile and reputation of the practice will be enhanced.

A word of caution: these community efforts must be perceived as a sincere desire to educate and to help people maintain oral health. If the program is begun and maintained only as a marketing program, it will be regarded by peers and the public as a gimmick to recruit patients. The style, frequency and boldness with which the DHE makes community and/or news media contacts must be determined by the dentist's preferences, budget, and regard for the community norm. The role of DHE can be a creative, practical answer to the need many dentists express to tastefully market their practice while maintaining an aura of professionalism.

Alternate titles for the DHE might be: facilitator, catalyst, initiator, organizer, mediator, congregator, investigator, interpreter, and marketer. All of these vital roles can be assumed by a staff member who is committed to the concept that today's viable dental practice is more than just a "filling station". It is a center for oral care providing a valued service to individual patients and the community-at-large. In today's changing, competitive environment, the DHE can provide the mark of distinction that elevates a practice beyond the norm and creates demand for dental services in a community and across a nation.