

A delicate balance

Do your staff and patients know how your emergency system works? **Laura Horton** explains how to handle patients requesting emergency appointments

I have the same conversations repeatedly. Either dentists are understandably fearful of having emergency spaces that are not filled, the team are fed up of double bookings and running late, or there are emergency spaces but they are being filled up with other routine treatments.

If you want to improve your systems and take the stress out of your day, where do you start? With an audit. This is your first chance to gain greater insight to your 'emergency' requirements.

Removing the guesswork

I advise a three-month review of every emergency appointment that has been scheduled to see if it was booked on the day and if it was a genuine emergency.

I would be noting down the days of the week, too. This way you spot trends. Every practice is different – some practices need more emergency spaces on a Monday and others need more on a Friday.

'Your front desk team is put under huge pressure and they need to know how to triage an appointment'

Once you have this date, you can make concrete, factual decisions and take the guesswork out of it.

But before you block time out of your diary, the dentists need to have a serious and open conversation about how long they really need for an emergency patient of the practice and how long

they need for a new patient emergency.

Most practices book 15 minutes per patient. The reality is that you may need 30 minutes for an emergency patient.

Clinically, you need to review what you are going to do in that appointment, too. The goal should be to get the patient out of pain or temporise a tooth, not to complete treatment in that appointment.

Once you have decided on the time scale, confirm the fee for new and existing patients, so you both understand what you are dealing with.

Training

The next step is to train the team. Your front desk team is put under huge pressure and they need to know how to triage an appointment.

Ensure that spaces are only booked on the day. I advise spaces to be from 2pm onwards as this is an unpopular time and genuine emergencies will be able to attend.

The team need to understand the fee for the emergency

appointment so that they can communicate this to the patient and confirm this fee is only for the emergency appointment; they will be provided with an estimate for treatment.

They also need to explain that treatment will not be completed at this appointment – this supports the dentist's confirmation when asked and put under pressure.

If you have emergency spaces and you are filling them up with treatments as your diaries are booked so far ahead, then you need to review your entire diary zoning to help your capacity.

If your team fill them up because you have demanding patients that want appointments as soon as possible, then you need to train your team further to understand how to handle these dominant personalities.

Thinking ahead

Once you have a system in place, looking through your diaries to audit key dates will pay off dividends in the future.

Do you need more emergency spaces before or after a bank holiday weekend? What about the day before Good Friday – is this a day of chaos and panic each year? When is Christmas going to fall, and will you be closed for a few days?

If you make modifications to your emergency system, make sure to re-audit the system in a few months' time to ensure it is working. If there is a clear problem, your team should let you know immediately rather than let it fester into an emergency for your business.

A proactive approach to handling emergencies will result in a successful system that supports the patients that are in pain and need to be seen, the front desk, and, of course, the dentist they are scheduled to see. ■

Endodontic Emergencies

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The Endodontic Emergencies campaign focuses on being prepared to deal with an emergency if and when the time comes. With articles from leading dentists and endodontists, *Endodontic Practice* hopes to keep you clued up on treatment specifics, trauma cases, and offer advice on dealing with dental emergencies in general and specialist practices.

AUTHOR

LAURA HORTON has worked in dentistry for more than 18 years and has an unrivalled passion and enthusiasm for treatment coordination, business and team development. In 2008, Laura left her full-time practice management role. Ever since, with her years of experience and vast amount of knowledge, Laura has been working with dental practices to help them successfully reach their true potential.