

A role like no other

Laura Horton explains the benefits of having a treatment coordinator and discusses why having one can work wonders for general practice

Many people believe the treatment coordinator (TCO) role is only for specialist dental practices or those providing implants and cosmetic dentistry. However, it works in general practice for all patients, and dentists and hygienists can be supported by having this role in their practice.

The TCO role also supports both existing and new patients of the practice, and helps improve the patient experience.

There are many aspects of the role, but you do not need to implement all of them. Understanding the needs and restraints of your own practice will help you prioritise which area to implement first.

New patients

Scheduling new patients into the TCO's diary can help support the entire team, as the TCO will be ready to meet the new patient on arrival so they do not have to queue at the desk. They can take the patient to the waiting area and sit with them to explain the paperwork required prior to their first appointment.

If you provide refreshments for patients, the TCO can also show the new patient how to access this facility for future visits. Alternatively, the TCO can take the patient straight into the private consultation area so they avoid the hustle and bustle of the busy practice. This is a much more pleasant experience than the patient joining a queue, listening to other patients discussing costs and future appointments, being given a clipboard over the desk, and being told to take a seat.

Once the paperwork is complete, the TCO can spend time asking about and listening to the patient's goals and concerns, while confirming motivating factors for joining the practice. Relationship building and handling anxiety also forms a huge part of this short appointment.



Laura Horton

Laura worked has worked in dentistry for 21 years, and has a passion and enthusiasm for treatment coordination, business and team development. In 2008, Laura left her full-time practice management role to help dental practices reach their potential. Laura is a master at communicating with patients and provides training to dentists with her knowledge and experience.

During this time, the TCO will personality profile the patient. I use DISC personality profiling and find it extremely useful. For example, a 'D' character is a person who does not like small talk and wants you to get straight to the point. They also like to be seen on time.

While this patient may seem 'quick and easy', there are also negatives – they often do not listen and can make rash decisions.

This is important to note, so if the patient does need treatment, the TCO will ensure the dentist is aware of the personality type, to help the dentist focus on ensuring they have listened to and discussed all of the options and, most importantly, risks before making a decision.

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The TCO will take the patient through to meet the dentist and nurse (or hygienist for direct access), then handover to them; for example, 'Laura is here today as she is concerned about the health of her gums, they bleed when brushing and her breath is not as fresh as it used to be'.

The TCO will either stay in the appointment (depending on how busy his or her diary is) or return to the consultation room type up their notes from the appointment.

Options meetings

All patients will benefit from time with the TCO when it comes to their treatment options and the membership options offered in your practice.

In most dental practices, patients spend time at the desk asking the team about their treatment plan and costs from the dentist or hygienist. This system is very uncomfortable for all involved, as there is no patient confidentiality here as others can listen to the conversation. It can become more complicated if the patient is NHS registered, and has both NHS and private options to choose from.

In addition, many practices lack a follow-up system if the patient does not rebook. New patients usually have more appointments to

schedule than existing patients and this can be very time consuming at the desk.

If your practice offers membership or a plan, the dentist and/or hygienist may have spoken about it during the appointment – either joining it or amending their current plan to one more suitable – and the patient may require further explanation or confirmation from the reception team. Again, these discussions are probably happening at the front desk, which is not confidential and may be busy with waiting patients.

For all of these scenarios, a TCO can be highly beneficial for conducting options meetings with patients. For new patients, this can be prescheduled for directly after their assessment, for other patients if the TCO is available they can be seen; if not an appointment can be arranged at a later time.

I have TCOs who only work one day a week and many find it surprising to learn many patients will come back on that day for options meetings. This is because there is no charge and the patient values time from the TCO to answer their questions, allowing them to make an informed decision.

Follow-ups

Lastly, I mentioned follow-up with patients. Even with a TCO supporting communication, patients will not always be able to move ahead with treatment. It is really important you have a follow-up system the TCO is responsible for so you stay in contact with the patients, as and when they would like you to do so.

The TCO system is a much friendlier way of managing follow-ups, as it is an extension of an existing conversation rather than a cold call from the reception team 'to see if you have thought the proposed treatment?'

If the idea of introducing a TCO sounds appealing, I recommend starting with one day a week and using the role to support the areas of the practice that will benefit everyone the most. The initial consultation, and options meetings really supports the clinicians and the desk, but, most importantly, the patient and follow up supports the patients and the practice in a proactive way. **D**

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