



Time to Interrupt?

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PANKEYGRAM

Times seem slow but there may be acres of diamonds in your own backyard.

Recent survey data collected by The Pankey Institute indicate that our upper-level Continuum participants are increasingly more effective at spending appropriate time with each new patient to do a comprehensive examination and treatment plan. We also have data from our 2003 Pankey Operations Study supporting the contention that “Pankey Practices” enjoy higher per patient revenue, which implies a more effective use of the complete examination, diagnosis and treatment plan process than the average dental office.

Information published in the October 2003 Pankeygram provided you with some details on operational efficiencies that could be implemented in the management of your dental practice. From the 2003 Pankey Operations Study, we also have statistical evidence revealing that it has been more difficult for dental practices to generate a profit over the last three years.

I have placed an “Investing Basics” article on my website that will give you something upon which to reflect, as you consider strategic options for your unique situation.

Our Continuum participants report that new patient flow is down, as well as the number of patients saying yes to treatment plans. While many dentists place their primary focus on new patient flow, it is not the only or main driver in a uniquely individualized, relationship-based, values-driven practice. You can intentionally develop existing patients by helping them clarify their health choices. This should be a primary responsibility of the dentist and team. Rather than focus on new patient flow, take a fresh look at the status of each existing patient.

When thinking about a practice, often the “acres of diamonds” are overlooked especially if, when the patient first came into the practice he or she said, “No,” “Not now,” or “Could we slow down?”

Ask yourself, “Do I see myself as a fixer of teeth or a facilitator of health?” From my vantage point, I would suggest that you move toward a more intentional engagement with your existing patients. It’s probably been a while since you

intentionally engaged patients, whom you’ve been seeing for years, in clarifying

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their health values via discovery and encouragement.

It's a common story. A new patient walks in the door. You invite this client to a comprehensive exam experience, and he or she accepts the process. This new patient even heartily joins in the process with the appropriate spirit of discovery and learning. Then, the patient starts treatment but all the while is really still sizing up your office. The new patient measures your responses to requests, questions and desires (expressed or unexpressed).

Then, this patient moves into the "hygiene loop" – sometimes with and sometimes without a well thought out or outlined development plan. From that point on, more often than not, the patient is on his or her own, and the six-month re-care cycle continues unless there is an intentional interruption designed to develop the patient's concern for oral health and action.

Thousands of patients in thousands of communities across the country continue to assume that crisis dentistry is the norm. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." It takes considerable energy and design to reverse this inertia.

Often as a dental team, we assume the patient knows what is expected. Does the patient really know? We told the patient

but did we engage the patient? Did we sustain interest in helping the patient make optimal choices?

Has someone on your team intentionally stopped what they were doing with the patient, changed the context of the setting and asked the patient about his/her understanding of his/her oral health? Is there a time when you schedule active listening? This conversation could be beneficial to your practice health!

At times when things seem slow, you have plenty of opportunity to become busy learning with your patients. Scheduled follow-up about the patient's progress and ownership of his/her oral health plan is critical to facilitating further engagement in the practice. The feedback the patient hears needs to be positive. Focus on strengths. Give your patients the opportunity to talk and to own their preferred future. The desire for optimal dentistry will rise and so will your profit. But more exciting, your patients' lives will be improved, and you will have fun doing your best work for them. Continue to discover the "acres of diamonds" in your own backyard.

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