

OUT OF HOURS...OUT OF MIND?

Julia Dawson looks at top-quality care, even when the practice is closed.

So, the practice is looking great, your team couldn't be better and your patients seem delighted with the services you're providing - during practice hours of course. But, what if one of your valued patients has an accident and needs urgent dental treatment? Can you ensure that they will be treated with the same care and attention when you're off duty? What happens in the evening or on a Sunday while you're enjoying some well-deserved down time?

We all understand that patient's dental emergencies don't always occur during normal working hours. By ensuring that your out of hours services are both clinically excellent and convenient you're going to engender trust, loyalty and word of mouth recommendations from your patients. The tips below are designed to show that with a little planning and team spirit can ensure your patients enjoy top-quality care, whatever the time of day or night.

Emergency services

Patients don't realistically expect you to be available 24-hours a day, seven days a week. But they also don't want to have to battle over out-of-hours appointments or deal with a complex dental emergency service when they are in pain - especially if they have already paid for high-quality, private treatment.

Most accident and emergency service staff are there to preserve life and cannot be expected to prioritise saving a tooth over an urgent medical condition. In the majority of cases, all that the A&E staff are able to do is patch a patient up, temporarily alleviate pain and refer them back to your practice when it reopens. Their role, after all, is to preserve life where possible and diagnose any urgent medical conditions; they cannot be expected to prioritise saving a tooth or preventing future dental problems in the way a qualified dental practitioner would. Yet almost a third of private dental patients currently find themselves faced with this option in an emergency situation.

In my experience, around a third of patients calling Denplan's out-of-hours emergency helpline have been left stranded at home with no access to emergency care. This is either because their dental condition does not fit the emergency criteria of the local NHS service relied on by their dentist, or because the service is fully booked. We always try and offer a solution to a patient who is in pain; whether this is contacting their dentist at home, referring them to another practice in the area or sourcing telephone advice, but patients can often feel disappointed that their own dentist could not provide them with direct access to suitable care in the first place.

Other common out-of-hours cases include pain from possible abscesses, lost fillings, fractured cusps and dry sockets following a recent extraction, as well as facial injuries. Since most emergencies occur while patients are at or near their home, it is a really good idea to make sound provision for local out-of-hours treatment, which is in keeping with the quality of care that your patients have come to expect from your practice.

Join forces

For most practices, the solution is to join forces and share the out-of-hours calls with fellow dentists. Practices with several practitioners can often manage this between themselves with a simple rota and a mobile phone number. By recording clear instructions on a voicemail message, asking patients to leave their name and contact number and advising a specific timescale for when they can expect a call back, the on-call dentist only needs to check their messages periodically.

Smaller or single-handed practices can join an inter-practice rota, or indeed set one up where none already exist. This involves a group of practices joining together to create an out-of-hours service for the patients of those practices. Getting together with your fellow dentists, settling on the ground rules for your particular rota and sharing the responsibility for your patients' emergency care, ultimately results in greater patient loyalty for every practice involved, not to mention the satisfaction of knowing that you are providing the best possible round-the-clock care – without chaining yourself to the surgery!

Go the extra mile

One of the things that often come up when discussing poor call-centre experiences is being left to listen to a ringing phone. Most people will hang up after four or five rings during the day, but if you don't have an out of hours answer-phone message in place the patient can often feel abandoned with nowhere to turn. An appropriate message with concise instructions can really make the difference to patients – often at a time of extreme pain and stress.

It may sound silly to undertake training on something that occurs when you're not working, but getting your out-of-hours communication right is really important for retaining the loyalty and retention of your patients and can often go a long way to attracting new ones and growing your business. Some payment plan specialists offer a range of training courses on topics such as Improving Communication and Customer Care, not to mention how to get across the clearest and most helpful out of hours information on your website. Many of these courses also offer verifiable CPD and can be invaluable in improving the patient journey and ensuring the very best care.

So, hopefully the information here has shown you that providing an effective out-of-hours service is incredibly important, not only to ensure that your patients are looked-after in an emergency, but also to secure their loyalty and open up communication with other practices in your area. It's a win-win situation!

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Julia joined Denplan in 1990, running the Administration department. Now as Director of Customer Services, Julia has overall responsibility for the Practice Support Advisors, Customer Advisors, Registration and Administration Services, Insurance and Helpline, Corporate Customer Services teams and the Out-of-Hours Helpline team. Working closely with the other divisions across the company Julia and her team are constantly looking for ways in which they can improve and diversify their service offering.