



Smart and Simple Steps to Manage Patient Injuries

By TDIC Risk Management Staff

An injured patient may be the last thing dentists want to think about. However, in reality, patients can be injured during dental treatment or as the result of an incident such as a slip and fall in the office. Treatment-related injuries can run the gamut and include burns, lacerations, swallowed objects and allergic reactions, according to The Dentists Insurance Company.

TDIC recommends a few essential actions in the event of an injury to help keep the situation in check. First and foremost, stop and assess the injured individual, even if the injury appears insignificant.

TDIC Claims Representative Dina Martin said burns and cuts are common treatment-related injuries. While an incident may be minor, communication and follow-up are important.

"An injury can happen even if the dentist is very careful. Issues often develop with the management afterward," said Martin, who has reviewed thousands of claims during her 29-year career. "I have had cases where the dentist minimized the situation and that made the patient even more upset. The dentist failed to recognize and acknowledge how the patient was feeling."

Martin emphasized the importance of communication and compassion in handling a patient injury. "Sometimes the dentist thinks showing compassion is admitting guilt. We can never stress enough to communicate with patients, make referrals if appropriate and follow up to see how they are doing." Often what a patient wants is for the dentist to care and acknowledge the injury, she added. "For some patients, it is not always about the money."

Prior to making any representations to pay for or reimburse a bill, call the TDIC Advice Line. Risk Management analysts can help dentists navigate patient demands to alleviate uncomfortable situations. However, if the analyst believes the situation could develop into more than a simple refund, he or she may recommend the dentist speak with a claims representative.

One of the common incidents for both general dentists and specialists occurs when a patient swallows an object. This requires the dentist to provide additional care and follow-up. TDIC advises dentists to strongly recommend patients check with their physician to receive direction on how he or she should manage the event. TDIC's Professional Liability policy provides coverage up to \$10,000 under the medical payments provision for medical expenses related to dental treatment. The insured must submit the medical bill to TDIC in order to receive consideration of the associated medical expenses such as radiographs.

Allergic reactions are another area to be aware of when considering patient injury. They are not as common as other patient injuries, but can be significant, according to TDIC. A patient's health history form is the essential tool in preventing this type of injury. TDIC recommends reviewing and updating the health history form at every appointment. Make sure the form is legible and fill out a new form when there are changes to medications. Keep previous health history forms on file.

An incident report is crucial if a patient is injured, and it can help mitigate your liability. Complete the incident report once the event is over, but no later than the following day. Briefly and factually describe the incident. Remain objective and avoid judgment about the cause or extent of the injury. Be sure to include the date, time and location of the incident and names and contact information of witnesses. Note actions taken by you and your staff, and document any emergency medical treatment delivered, where and by whom. Also, note if medical treatment was offered and denied by the patient. Be sure to list devices, such as a walker, cane or crutches, that the patient was using at the time of the incident in the instance of a slip and fall. If it is appropriate, photograph the injury to document the appearance and extent on the actual date of the injury.

If a patient is injured in your dental practice, a calm, caring attitude and clear communication can make a considerable difference. Combined with the following steps, dentists could prevent an incident from becoming a claim. Essential actions to manage patient injuries:

- Stop and carefully assess the situation.
- Call 911 if immediate medical attention is necessary.
- Focus on the patient and provide basic first aid.
- Communicate with the patient and acknowledge the patient's perspective.
- Keep treatment for the injury within your scope of practice.
- Stabilize the patient and reschedule any incomplete treatments.
- Refer the patient to a physician as needed.
- Document the injury (including a photo if possible) and note any witnesses with their contact information.
- Follow up with the patient to check on his or her recovery.
- Contact your insurance carrier to file an incident report.

TDIC's Risk Management Advice Line can be reached at 800.733.0634.

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