



Not-So-Smartphones: Mobile Device Dangers in Dental Practices

By TDIC Risk Management Staff

When you walk from your car to your practice, out to lunch or out for the day, would a passerby have trouble looking you in the eye? Even worse, is it hard to make eye contact with your own dental team? If so, the issue isn't you — and you're not alone. Smartphones and other mobile technology are increasingly capturing more attention and impeding everyday interactions. You may have even seen a pedestrian step into a crosswalk at the wrong time, just because the little screen was more interesting than the safety signal.

Those mobile devices can be just as dangerous right within your office. If your team members are on their personal phones — whether taking calls, texting, web browsing or “just quickly checking something” — the practice is made vulnerable.

Mobile device use contributes to a variety of dangers:

1. Distraction from phone use can increase liability. Inaccurate documentation and lack of attention to clinical detail can occur when concentration is divided.
2. Respect is in short supply. Screen time gives patients the impression their dental care is not a priority. And, if you're on the phone, you give team members the impression that work isn't your priority either.
3. Professionalism is compromised. When employers communicate via text with their teams, the conversation may become casual and the employees may not take the matters as seriously as intended.
4. Clear communication is hard to maintain via text. If an employee issue like running late for work is sent via text, it's difficult to document.
5. Infection control can also be compromised. A number of recent studies indicate that mobile phones help spread bacteria and viruses. A 2015 study shared by Healthline revealed that less than 10 percent of health care workers regularly sterilize their phones.
6. Separation of private and practice life is necessary. While your team members should be able to read, watch and enjoy the content of their choice off hours, objectionable videos and photos shared with co-workers can lead to discomfort or liability.

Calls to the Risk Management Advice Line at The Dentists Insurance

Company (TDIC) reveal a pattern of issues related to text messaging, especially when it comes to absence notification. Text messages from employees not only show a lack of respect, they can also indicate an unwillingness to speak with an employer directly about an issue.

In one case, a dentist reported he received a text from an employee at 4 a.m. on a Saturday conveying she would not be able to make it to work that day. The dentist called the employee back immediately after receiving the text. And, when the employee answered, the dentist heard “what sounded like Vegas in the background.” He later found photos of a bridal shower at a local casino posted on her Facebook page. Had there been an absence notification policy detailed in the employee manual, the dentist could have addressed the form of notification as a performance concern.

Fortunately, in addition to a specific absence notification policy, there are easy steps you can take to protect your practice from mobile distraction.

Here's how to create a “smart” phone environment:

1. Establish an office policy prohibiting cellphone and smartphone use while on duty for sending or receiving personal calls, emails or text messages, or using smartphone applications — both in the front office and in treatment areas.
2. Encourage employees to take breaks as needed and as appropriate. If they know that they'll have opportunities to check their phones during a break or lunchtime, they'll be less likely to sneak use during working hours.
3. Lead by example. Communicate to employees through the channel that you'd like them to communicate with you. And refrain from checking your own mobile device while on duty.
4. Review mobile device policies, as reflected in your employee manual, with new hires and as a reminder at staff meetings.

If you're a TDIC policyholder, you already have access to a full library of risk management resources through tdicinsurance.com. One TDIC guide for dentists, *Developing Effective Employment Practices*, covers essential information to include in your employee manual, including employment practices related to mobile device use.

Whether you choose to refer to TDIC's resources or create your own,

your employee manual's mobile device policies should be reflected in the following sections:

Work environment

- Personal electronic device policy
- Email and internet use policy

Office operations

- Health and safety (OSHA) issues
- Use of office resources

With considerate mobile device policies, you can establish the right tone for your work environment while protecting yourself, your team and your patients from significant risk.

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

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