



Follow-Up Protocol: When Office Staff Inadvertently Give Treatment Advice

By TDIC Risk Management Staff

Most of us have been at that point in life when we just need someone to tell us everything will be alright. That what we're going through is normal. That we're not alone, and we'll get through it. That the difficulty we're experiencing is temporary. "Hang in there," "It'll be alright," "Don't give up" are all words of encouragement we've heard at one time or another.

In dentistry, however, those seemingly innocent words can have unwanted consequences. When patients call to report pain or discomfort following a procedure, they sometimes need more than a sympathetic ear – they need the dentist's advice and necessary assessment. When well-intentioned office staff attempt to problem-solve without bringing the issue to the dentist, patients can be left without the follow-up care they need, leading to possible complications.

Sometimes, office staff provide more than consolation, they provide actual treatment advice. Most do so unwittingly, assuming they are simply being helpful. They may not want to bother the doctor with "minor" complaints. Other times, they do not take the patient's concerns seriously. Whatever the case, the result can often be devastating for a practice.

In one case, a patient suffered complications following the placement of implants. She called the day after the procedure, and complained that she was sore at the implant site and her lip was still numb. Without consulting the dentist, the front office staff member told her it was normal. Two days later, the patient called again, reporting pain and numbness. Although her dentist was not available, she was seen that evening by another dentist in the practice, who prescribed pain medication.

Months went by, and the patient's pain and numbness continued, so she demanded the implants be removed. It wasn't until that time that the operating dentist was made aware that she had called the day after the original procedure complaining of pain and numbness. However, the dentist stood by the action of the front office staff, explaining that it was office protocol to tell patients to wait to come in until their next scheduled postoperative appointment, because "patients often exaggerate pain."

The patient eventually filed – and won – a negligence lawsuit, claiming neither dentist cared about the pain or numbness she was experiencing. Had proper protocols been in place, and the front office staff informed the dentist of the situation immediately, the outcome may have been much different.

In another case, a patient emailed his orthodontist's office with concerns about his new retainer. He complained about the device affecting his speech, causing a lisp. The treatment coordinator explained that lisps are normal for the first few days, and recommended the patient exercise his tongue and mouth with the new retainer in place. The patient emailed again weeks later and complained of sensitivity and pain in his back teeth. The treatment coordinator again explained that his experience is normal, as his shifting teeth caused his bite to be off, causing sensitivity. She told him to "hang in there," and to continue wearing the retainer.

The patient insisted she speak to the dentist, who recommended he not wear the retainer. A week later, the patient emailed again, complaining that his bite was off dramatically and he was experiencing sharp pains. In the end, the patient insisted on speaking to the dentist directly. He lost confidence in the promised treatment outcome and requested a full refund. The dentist should have inserted himself and personally addressed the patient's concerns rather than delegating the interaction to staff.

Despite the positive intentions of well-meaning employees, providing treatment advice, whether on the phone, over email or in person, can put your dental practice at risk. When staff take it upon themselves to handle patient complaints without involving the dentist, they are, essentially, practicing dentistry without a license. Needless to say, this can open dentists up to liability claims, as they are ultimately responsible for all employee actions.

However, having a proper protocol in place for follow-up care can help mitigate some of the potential fallout. Your employees should be advised to report all feedback, whether good or bad, and let the dentist decide what needs to be done. You should encourage open communication between front and back office staff, and remind your employees that it is far better to over communicate than under communicate.

Your front office staff are often the first contacts a patient has with your practice. They are your eyes and ears, fielding phone calls and interacting with patients. Trusting these key players of your team is essential, and empowering them to handle patient issues legally and ethically is crucial to the long-term success of your practice.

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

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