

MANAGEMENT & MARKETING

(Editor's Note: This quarterly JCO column is compiled by Contributing Editor Robert Haeger. Every three months, Dr. Haeger presents a successful approach or strategy for a particular aspect of practice management. Your suggestions for future topics or authors are welcome.)

Have you ever spoken with your scheduling coordinator about how much time is spent following up on missed appointments? You would probably be surprised by the amount of time it takes to track down busy patients or their parents and to reschedule. What's more, a sizable number of patients leave the office without scheduling their next appointments at all. In my practice, several young patients are regularly dropped off; they usually ask us to call their parents to schedule their next visits.

This month's Management & Marketing column centers on patients who, for one reason or another, don't have scheduled appointments. Dr. Ted Bennion lays out his protocol for streamlining the follow-up process to make sure each patient's treatment progresses efficiently. Take a few minutes to discuss this article with your scheduling coordinator. A review of your office's follow-up system might reveal a number of opportunities to save time for your staff and improve care for your patients.

ROBERT S. HAEGER, DDS, MS



Dr. Haeger



Dr. Bennion

Communicating with "No Future Appointment" Patients

My practice has struggled with the problem of dealing with patients who are in active treatment, but do not have future appointments scheduled. Following up with patients who missed their last appointments or did not schedule future appointments at their last visits can be a significant administrative burden. Busy patients often fail to return phone calls or reply to postcards, and the day-to-day demands and pressures of an active practice can take priority over the task of contacting patients without appointments. Communication with patients is fundamental to successful orthodontic treatment, and inconsistent efforts to reach them can send a message that their appointments are not considered important.

When it became apparent that the system I had used for years was not working, my scheduling coordinator and I sat down together to develop a system that would remove any obstacles to making appointments. Used only for patients in active treatment, the system is based on a series of pre-scheduled form letters that allow us to attempt several contacts and finally to dismiss patients who do not respond to any of our requests to call the office. Different protocols are followed for observation patients, retention patients, and patients who chronically miss appointments.

Procedure

The "no future appointment" (NFA) binder is kept at the front desk, within reach of the scheduling coordinator. It contains a step-by-step protocol that must be followed every business day to

| Broken Appointment Protocol | No Future Appointment Protocol |
|--|--|
| <i>(missed last scheduled appointment and has not rescheduled)</i> | <i>(never scheduled a future appointment at the last visit or canceled without rescheduling)</i> |
| Day 1: | Day 1: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home phone number • Send postcard • Note in comment section of chart: <i>Date / LM re:MAPC H / time of call</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home phone number • Send postcard • Note in comment section of chart: <i>Date / LM re:NFAPC H / time of call</i> |
| Day 7: | Day 7: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home and alternative phone numbers • Send Letter 1 • Note in comment section of chart: <i>Date / LM re:MA1 A / time of call</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home and alternative phone numbers • Send Letter 1 • Note in comment section of chart: <i>Date / LM re:NFA1 A / time of call</i> |
| Day 14: | Day 14: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home and emergency phone numbers • Send Letter 2 • Note in chart: <i>Date / LM re:MA2 E / time of call</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home and emergency phone numbers • Send Letter 2 • Note in chart: <i>Date / LM re:NFA2 E / time of call</i> |
| Day 21: | Day 21: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home phone number • Send Letter 3 (certified), pending dismissal • Note in chart: <i>Date / LM re:MA3 H / time of call</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call home phone number • Send Letter 3 (certified), pending dismissal • Note in chart: <i>Date / LM re:NFA3 H / time of call</i> |
| Day 51: | Day 51: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dismiss patient • Send Letter 4 (certified) • Change status to “dismissed by office” • Note in chart: <i>Pt D/M due to lack of response</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dismiss patient • Send Letter 4 (certified) • Change status to “dismissed by office” • Note in chart: <i>Pt D/M due to lack of response</i> |

Fig. 1 Summary of “no future appointment” process (LM = left message; MA = missed appointment; NFA = no future appointment; PC = postcard; 1 = first letter; 2 = second letter; 3 = third letter; H = called home; A = called home and alternative; E = called home and emergency; Pt = patient; D/M = dismissed).



July 22, 2008

Mr. & Mrs. Smith
1234 Main Street
Medford, Oregon 97504

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Smith:

On July 15, 2008, Luke did not show up for his appointment, and our office was not given prior notice. It is easy to forget an orthodontist appointment when life gets busy. We are sure this is why you have allowed Luke to miss his recently scheduled time with us.

Our desire is to create a fantastic smile and healthy bite for Luke, and these appointments are essential to making that happen. Would you please call us to schedule an appointment today?

Sincerely,

MaryAnn James
Schedule Coordinator
(779-7936)

T E D W . B E N N I O N , D M D M S • O R T H O D O N T I C S
725-B GOLF VIEW • MEDFORD, OR 97504 • PHONE: 541.779.7936 • FAX: 541.857.1212 • BENNIONSMILES.COM

A

Fig. 2 Letter 1, sent on Day 7. A. Letter for missed appointment (continued on next page).

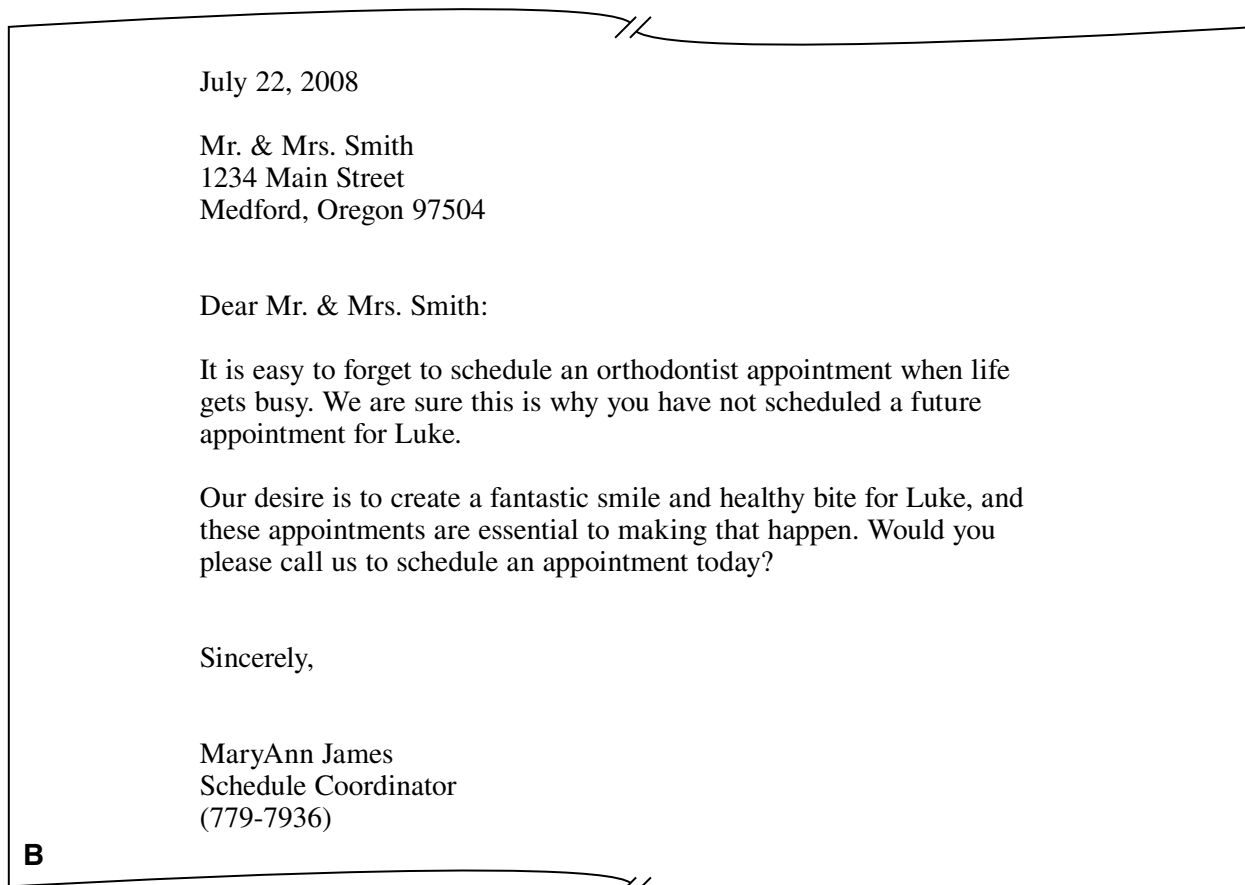


Fig. 2 (cont.) B. Letter 1 for no future appointment.

ensure that patients are rescheduled promptly. Each page in the binder lists one step in the process; the adjacent page shows the postcard or letter that accompanies that step. The front flap of the binder contains a summary sheet for the entire process (Fig. 1).

Day 1

Whenever a patient misses an appointment or leaves the office without scheduling the next appointment, the scheduling coordinator calls the patient's home or cell-phone number to reschedule. If the responsible party cannot be reached, a message is left and a postcard sent. A comment is made in the patient's file indicating the date and time of the call and noting that the postcard has been mailed. A reminder is entered, using an accordion file or our practice-management software, to call the patient one week later. If the patient returns the call and schedules an appoint-

ment, his or her name is removed from the reminder list.

Day 7

One week later, if the patient has not yet scheduled an appointment, a follow-up call is made to the patient's home and to any alternative phone numbers listed on the patient information form. In addition, the first letter is sent (Fig. 2), and the actions are recorded in the patient's file. A reminder is made to call the patient after another week.

Day 14

One week later, a third call is made to the home. If the responsible party is not reached, a call is also made to the emergency contact listed on the patient information form. (It is important to make sure at the initial examination that the

July 29, 2008

Mr. & Mrs. Smith
1234 Main Street
Medford, Oregon 97504

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Smith:

My scheduling coordinator has informed me that despite several attempts by mail and phone to contact you regarding the need to schedule an appointment for Luke, she has still not received a response. Each orthodontic appointment allows me to move treatment forward and monitor compliance. When these appointments are not set at regular intervals, it hinders my ability to deliver the quality of care that I wish to provide to Luke. Additionally, it increases the risk of permanent scars and lengthens the time necessary to complete his care.

I urge you to call my office at the earliest possible opportunity and schedule an appointment so that we may put Luke's treatment back on course.

Sincerely,

Ted W. Bennion, DMD, MS

Fig. 3 Letter 2, sent on Day 14.

patient has provided an emergency contact number and granted written permission to call that number if necessary.) The scheduling coordinator politely explains the situation and requests help in contacting the patient's family. A second letter, this one signed by the orthodontist, is sent (Fig. 3), and the actions are recorded in the patient's file.

Day 21

One week later, a fourth call is made to the home, and a third letter is sent by certified mail, stating that the patient will be dismissed from treatment if a response is not received within 30 days (Fig. 4). Again, the actions performed are recorded in the patient's file.

Day 51

Thirty days later, a final letter is sent by certified mail dismissing the patient from treatment (Fig. 5). The patient's status is changed from "active" to "dismissed by office", and the dismissal due to lack of response is noted in the patient's file.

Discussion

When we first began using the NFA system, we wrote six letters rather than four, with longer intervals between communications. After using the system for a short time, we found that most patients responded to our initial correspondence and were rescheduled quickly, but that a minority

August 5, 2008

Mr. & Mrs. Smith
1234 Main Street
Medford, Oregon 97504

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Smith:

It has been quite some time since Luke's last appointment with our office. As I have stated in my previous letter, these regular adjustment appointments are essential to the success of his treatment. When these appointments are missed, we are unable to ensure that treatment is progressing normally, and repeatedly missed appointments can cause delays in treatment as well as major oral health problems. I am sure that when you decided to pursue orthodontic treatment, you did not intend to neglect to schedule and keep these much-needed appointments.

Unfortunately, I am unable to continue treating any patient who does not comply with my treatment plan. Scheduling and keeping these regular adjustment appointments is the most crucial part of following that plan and the only way I can ensure the proper care for each patient in treatment.

Upon receipt of this note, please call MaryAnn at 779-7936 to schedule an appointment. You will find that she is eager to arrange an appointment with you.

If you do not contact the office within 30 days, we will be compelled to discontinue providing treatment for Luke, and his file will be closed.

Sincerely,

Ted W. Bennion, DMD, MS

Fig. 4 Letter 3, sent on Day 21.

did not respond until receiving the first letter signed by the orthodontist. Reducing the number of letters and shortening the intervals between them has helped reduce the length of time during which patients are out of touch with the office.

The system is straightforward, but the procedures must be followed to the letter. For instance, if a patient's name is not removed from the reminder list after an appointment is scheduled, the patient can become confused and frustrated.

Because the letters are increasingly serious in tone, a patient can easily take offense if a letter arrives after the situation has been resolved. Another example is neglecting to place a comment in the treatment record. Messages left on answering machines are sometimes erased by other family members, leading to debate about whether the call was ever made. The availability of specific time and date information allows the focus to be kept on the need to schedule the appointment.

September 4, 2008

Mr. & Mrs. Smith
1234 Main Street
Medford, Oregon 97504

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Smith:

Due to your lack of communication regarding my letter of August 5, 2008, I am hereby terminating treatment of Luke on this date. It is my opinion that Luke is in significant need of continued orthodontic care and should seek the services of another qualified orthodontic professional as soon as possible.

Neglect of orthodontic appliances can result in significant oral health problems that can include scarring of the teeth, gum disease, bone loss, injury from loose appliances, and potential loss of teeth. If you do not wish to seek further treatment, I recommend that you contact my office within the next 30 days to have the appliances removed.

Sincerely,

Ted W. Bennion, DMD, MS

Fig. 5 Letter 4 (dismissal letter), sent on Day 51.

The purpose of the NFA system is to keep patients in contact with the practice. The objective is not to dismiss patients, but to help busy people stay in touch and to maximize the chances of good treatment results. During the one and a half years in which we have used this system, we have had to dismiss only two patients. Another benefit is that the system provides an incentive for the scheduling coordinator to ensure that patients do not leave the office without scheduling their next appointments.

Most important, this procedure has given me more confidence that my patients are being seen

at the recommended intervals. I can pull an NFA report from our software program* at any time to check the effectiveness of the system. In addition, I can easily review the comments section in the file of a patient who failed to keep an appointment to ensure that the patient has been contacted. After implementation of this system, our “patients with no future appointment” report consistently lists only a handful of patients, all of whom are at some stage of the follow-up process.

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