The Importance of Being Efficient

by Anoop Sondhi, DDS, MS

The alarm goes off Monday morning at 6:00 a.m. for a 36 year old mother of three, who works as a management executive at a local company. Her spouse left yesterday morning on a flight to San Francisco for a sales meeting and will be out of town for several days. Sound similar to many of the families in your practice?

After hitting snooze on the alarm twice, wake-up calls to the kids begin. Next come showers, clothes, breakfast, brushing the teeth, gathering belongings and out the door – hoping to make the 8:00 a.m. morning meeting at the office. Around 10:00 a.m., she leaves the office to pick up her youngest child for an appointment at the pediatrician’s office. The doctor’s office is running behind schedule and by the time the appointment is complete, and the child is returned to school, it is now 11:45 a.m. She gets back to the office just in time for lunch.

After a 1:00 p.m. client meeting, she needs to leave work around 2:00 p.m. to pick up her oldest child from school in time to make their 2:45 p.m. appointment in your office, which is also running behind. Finally, her child is seen for her appointment, and the assistant advises her that Susie needs to be scheduled back for some brackets to be repositioned in 4 weeks. It is now 4:00 p.m., too late to get back to her office for anything productive, and the third child has soccer practice at 5:00 p.m. Oh, and the others need to be fed, and she needs to stop and pick up milk.

The above scenario is not very far removed from the day-to-day realities of a lot of the patients that we treat. Look carefully at the sequence of events described in the preceding paragraph. With all that this lady has to deal with, by what logic did the orthodontist bring the patient in for an adjustment on one day, and then request a separate appointment in 4 weeks to reposition the brackets?

Might things not be better for the patient, the mother, and the orthodontist if a system were in place to recognize the need for this, and for everyone to be prepared for the brackets to be repositioned when the patient was already in the office for the adjustment? They certainly would. But this requires foresight, organization, planning, and a systematic approach. In a word – Efficiency.

Everyone knows, and one frequently hears almost everyone saying, that people lead busier and busier lives these days. Since this is such a frequently uttered bromide, I would urge my colleagues to consider the impact it should have on the way our practices are organized and conducted. Organizational efficiency dictates that we should have treatment systems in place to ensure that we maximize what is achieved at each appointment, with a resulting reduction in the total number of times that people have to be inconvenienced, by having to interrupt their day, for visits to our office. This not only reduces the cost for the patients, since missing time away from work is always expensive, but also reduces the cost of operation for us. Talk about a win-win situation!

“Organizational efficiency dictates that we should have treatment systems in place to ensure that we maximize what is achieved at each appointment...”

In a recent study, I was astonished to learn that the “average” treatment for an “average” case in a number of orthodontic offices requires 27 appointments. A closer analysis reveals that some of these appointments could easily have been “bundled”, reducing the number of unnecessary visits for the patient.

As an example, the patient calls the office to report a loose bracket. You know, one of those suicidal brackets that spontaneously jumps off the tooth while the patient was just...
sitting there! The patient is offered an appointment the next day at 10:30 a.m. to rebond the bracket. The exasperated mother wants to know why this can’t be done after school, since it wasn’t her son’s fault that the bracket came off anyway. Honest, he was just sucking on a marshmallow! She is then informed that emergencies cannot be scheduled during the rush hour after school (office policy, you know), and that she will need to come at 10:30 a.m. tomorrow, if she wants the bracket rebonded.

The still exasperated mother rearranges her day, and shows up with the child at 10:30 a.m. The bracket is dutifully rebonded, the archwire reinserted, and the patient sent on his way with instructions to keep the next appointment as scheduled. Except that a closer look reveals that the next appointment was exactly 2 weeks away, and the planned procedure at that time was to reposition 2 brackets. Those are the same 2 brackets that could easily have been repositioned while the patient was already prepped for the rebonding of a different bracket. You get the picture.

To avoid the kind of silliness that I have described above, it is my firm conviction that efficiency needs more than just lip service. It requires that we think carefully about our organizational structure, and our treatment sequences. This has lead to a definite refinement in the way we do things in our office. Following a couple of intense staff retreats, we developed a series of processes designed to avoid precisely the kind of silly inefficiency described in the previous paragraph. This really isn’t difficult, and it certainly makes things go better for the patients, and for us.

“...it is my firm conviction that efficiency needs more than just lip service.”

Let’s look at a different analogy. I want to travel from Indianapolis to San Francisco to present a Continuing Education course. I would like to work almost a regular schedule on Thursday, fly out to San Francisco that evening, and lecture on Friday. I look at one of the travel websites, and find that most flights from Indianapolis to San Francisco require a connection in either Atlanta, Dallas, Minneapolis, or Denver. By the time I waste an hour-or-so on the ground, and with the other attending delays associated with connecting flights, it is pretty late in the evening by the time I get to San Francisco. However, I spot one non-stop flight, which will leave Indianapolis late in the afternoon and, because I gain time as I fly west, allow me to arrive in San Francisco in time for dinner at my favorite restaurant in Fisherman’s Wharf.

Unfortunately, the airfare on this direct flight is higher than on all of the connecting flights through one of the hubs. Wait a minute. What sense does this make? If I take the connecting flight, the airline has to give me seats in 2 different airplanes. On the direct flight, it clearly burns less jet fuel, and only has to bother with assigning me a seat on a single flight. Why would they charge me more? Perhaps because it is more efficient, and I get to San Francisco in time for my dinner! So I happily pay a little more for this ticket, simply because it is more efficient, saves me time, and enhances my comfort.

Now, why don’t we think about this in the context of an orthodontic practice? If I can achieve complete treatment in 9 or 10 appointments, without ever compromising the excellence of the treatment result, wouldn’t my patients prefer that to 20 or so appointments? The difference between the two is not one of effectiveness in delivering the treatment result – it is a difference in efficiency. Presented properly, wouldn’t it make the patient recognize the higher value received in our office as a result of that efficiency, as opposed to a less organized and less efficient treatment experience in a different office? I certainly think so.

“So, fellow orthodontists, I urge you to rethink how your office and your treatment systems are organized. Define, and never compromise with, your process for developing as effective a treatment result as possible. Once that outcome has been defined, I urge you to go back and re-examine how efficiently that treatment result is being achieved. Examine the efficiency not just from your own point of view, but from that of your patient.

Count the total number of appointments you are averaging on each patient – the number might startle you. Then take a closer look at how many of those appointments were redundant, and could easily have been bundled. Look carefully at your appointment intervals. Time some of the critical procedures routinely performed in your office. Then schedule a staff retreat to review these issues, and to adjust your processes accordingly. If your experience is anything like ours, the process will be a real eye opener. You will find that your profitability will increase. You will end up with happier patients. You will end up with a happier staff. And you will end up with a happier you.

“If I can achieve complete treatment in 9 or 10 appointments, without ever compromising the excellence of the treatment result, wouldn’t my patients prefer that to 20 or so appointments?”