6 Tips to Improve Safety Standards in Your Dental Practice

We tell you easy ways to improve the safety standards in your dental practice to better protect your patients, staff, and yourself.
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It takes a lot to keep your patients and team safe: Knowledge of possible dangers, a persistent dedication to safety, and knowing what it takes to protect patients to the best of your ability.

When patients walk into your practice, it’s the beginning of a huge trust relationship. With cases in the news of infection control breaches, out-of-date instruments, products and more, patients who sit in your chair are placing their confidence in you.

Are you doing all you can to make sure that trust is well placed? Sure, you care about the safety of your patients, but are you aware of all possible safety concerns?

Let’s look at 6 ways to improve the safety standards for everyone in your dental practice.

Frequent patient concerns on the Dental Phobia Forum of DentalFearCentral.org:

1. What if I have an allergic reaction to the sedation or injection?
2. Will the x-ray radiation harm me?
3. What if the local anesthesia doesn’t work?
4. How do I know if the dental office and instruments are clean?
5. I’m worried I’ll be embarrassed because of my level of fear.
1. Implement a Safety Protocol Checklist

Both pilots and dentists are in highly technical positions requiring teamwork. Both are subject to human error where small, individual mistakes may lead to catastrophe if not addressed.

Of course you should always be in compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards, but also consider implementing a checklist of safety procedures in your office for certain procedures, similar to that of airline pilots. (Yes, airline pilots).

Russell Taichman, U-M professor of dentistry, recently co-authored the study, "Adaptation of airline crew resource management (CRM) principles to dentistry." He found using checklists makes for a safer, more standardized routine during dental procedures.*

One of the difficulties in dental practices is managing patient allergies. During a busy day, there’s always the chance we don’t take the amount of time we should to carefully review the medical history of patients. When doing this, patients are put at risk.

Here are some tips to help alleviate this safety concern:

– Make sure you know the allergies of every patient that walks through the door.
– Consider tracking different allergies using different colored bibs for patients. This way, everyone in the office knows his or her allergy.
– Keep Sharpies on hand to write dangerous allergies on a patients bib.
– Cover the latex glove boxes before the patient sits down so a practitioner doesn’t come in and accidentally put on a latex glove before checking the patient’s allergies.

Allergies of Concern:

• Latex
• Anesthetics
• Epinephrine
Infection control, sterility and cleanliness are top priorities to patients and to the dental team working in your office. Are you hiding your sterilization area behind closed doors and keeping it out of eyes reach? This may be counter-intuitive.

When patients see your sterilization area front and center, you are telling patients that their safety is important to you. This will also allow patients to relieve any fear by asking questions.

Why hide the sterilization center in the background where it would never be seen by anyone other than staff?
Properly functioning handpieces and instruments are crucial to maintaining a safe, efficient dental practice. Most dentists and dental assistants probably believe they are maintaining their handpieces correctly, but human error and ignorance is inevitable. And without regular, proper cleaning, biological matter and other contaminants build up on the turbine and impede performance.

Some maintenance tips to remember:

• Avoid corrosive chemicals when cleaning your handpieces and instruments.
• Proper lubrication is also essential to maintenance.
• Let handpieces go through the complete drying cycle when sterilizing.
• Handpieces should be cleaned and lubricated prior to each sterilization cycle.
• Never hastily apply oil. Excess oil may remain in the handpiece and get baked into the turbine during sterilization.
• Have a proper maintenance partner on speed dial and follow the manufacturer’s instructions.
When treating a nervous, anxious or unpredictable patient, the risks of making mistakes rise. By doing all you can to put your patients at ease, you’re not only improving their experience, you’re keeping them (and your staff) safe.

Tips for working on nervous patients:

• Set up your practice systems so that new patients coming to see you who are nervous are identified in advance.
• Think like a patient. Look around your practice and consider what it looks like to a new, nervous patient walking in. What will they notice? What will cause them concern?
• Give the patient as much control as possible.
• Ask questions about patient fears and triggers.

• If you sense the patient is in any kind of discomfort, stop and remind them that it is ok to ask questions or ask the practitioner to take a break.
  • Explain to patients you’ll be working together in a spirit of mutual co-operation.

The Dental Fears Research Clinic at the University of Washington reports that 20 percent of people experience dental anxiety. Two-thirds of these people attribute their fear to prior bad experiences.
These office improvements can ease patient fears ...

1. Consider headphones for your patients. Playing music during a dental procedure, *especially with headphones*, can help relax phobic patients. You can recommend patients bring a new CD or MP3 playlist so that the songs are to their liking.

2. Clinical aromatherapy has been proven to reduce patient anxiety in dental offices.

3. Ambiance matters. Some dental professionals decorate the waiting room like a living room to ease patient nerves.

4. Implement soothing artwork and calming water features in the office.

5. Have monitors in view of dental chairs to play movies to distract patients.

Between 5% and 8% of Americans avoid dentists out of fear, estimates Peter Milgrom, DDS, director of the Dental Fears Research Clinic at the University of Washington in Seattle and author of *Treating Fearful Dental Patients*. 
While achieving quality 3D images is important for precision in treatment planning, capturing scans responsibly with the lowest radiation dose possible also takes top priority.

To protect your patients to the best of your ability, invest in x-ray tools and techniques that require the smallest amount of radiation possible.

More and more patients are flocking to practitioners who have embraced digital x-rays. The advantages of this for patients are profound: immediate viewing of the digital image, ease of comparison for the future, an ability to enhance the image, better communication between dentists and lower radiation.

“Dose is important within the context of biologic risk. Low doses associated with dental diagnostic radiography have low risks.”
- Dr. John Ludlow
Dosimetry is the calculation of the absorbed dose in human tissue resulting from the exposure to ionizing x-ray radiation. It allows us to compare the risks of different radiographic examination alternatives.

**Here’s the take-away:** Recent advances in CBCT technology have reduced x-ray exposure to patients considerably.

Dr. John Ludlow, a distinguished researcher in imaging technology and radiation dose, has also recently published his newest study comparing doses from the new i-CAT model of CBCT technology, the *i-CAT FLX*, with those from conventional 2D and medical CT imaging alternatives.

Learn about decreasing orthodontic x-ray exposure using CBCT with this [podcast from Dr. Sean K. Carlson](http://bit.ly/1hpYFYo).

[Listen Now](http://bit.ly/1hpYFYo)
Dr. Ludlow says dosimetry studies allow practitioners to compare the relative risk of different examinations, techniques, and equipment. Together, with information on image quality and diagnostic utility, practitioners can make evidence-based decisions on when to prescribe radiographic imaging and what technologies and techniques to use in acquiring diagnostic images.

Here’s what Dr. Ludlow discovered ...

The image volume of the i-CAT FLX Quick Scan+ feature provides 3D information with minimal geometric distortion that is unavailable in any 2D image at a comparable dose.

The results showed that the i-CAT FLX Quick Scan+ protocols resulted in substantially lower doses than standard protocols for the child (P = 0.0167) and adult (P = 0.0055) phantoms. QuickScan+ allows for a full-dentition 3D scan at a lower dose than a 2D panoramic image.
The i-CAT FLX offers the most flexible imaging control of any cone beam 3D unit allowing you to target the desired field-of-view on each patient while minimizing the radiation dose.

SCAN  Clinical control and optimized patient care
With i-CAT, there’s no need to compromise between image quality and patient safety. High-resolution, volumetric images provide complete 3D views for more thorough analysis of bone structure and tooth orientation, while flexible scanning options allow you to control the dose and follow ALARA (As Low As Reasonably Achievable) radiation protocols.

PLAN  Powerful, comprehensive treatment tools
More than just a scanner, i-CAT includes powerful, yet easy-to-use, planning and treatment tools to help you take charge of your practice. Designed to streamline your workflow, i-CAT helps you move from scanning to consultation and treatment planning in less than one minute.

TREAT  More advanced procedures with greater predictability
Start planning immediately and offer an effective course of treatment—from implants to surgical guides and restorations. i-CAT’s open software architecture seamlessly integrates with orthodontic systems, CAD/CAM programs, imaging software, and practice management programs, expanding your practice’s capabilities.

To learn more about i-CAT, visit www.i-CAT.com
Learn More

In this free podcast by Dr. Sean K. Carlson of Carlson Orthodontics, Dr. Carlson explains x-ray exposure using CBCT. Carlson explains the details of Dr. John Ludlow’s study that reveals how x-ray dose of 3D CBCT orthodontic imaging is now less than conventional 2D imaging in orthodontics.

>>> Listen to “How to Decrease Orthodontic X-Ray Exposure Using CBCT"

You can find the podcast online at http://bit.ly/1hpYFYo