IS YOUR STERI-CENTER UP TO SCICAN’S SPECS?
In part one of a four-part series, we define “safety” as the first part of SciCan’s SPECs. We’ll discuss “predictable,” “efficient” and “compliant” in future articles.

When was the last time your practice looked at its marketing materials, including the website? What’s the message? Would we see pictures of walls with the perfect gray paint and color-coordinated accents? Are patients, portrayed by models, flashing their perfect smiles from an operatory? Perhaps there’s mention of the services offered, the team that offers it and how to get in touch. What could possibly be missing?

How the practice chooses to brand itself can pay dividends. It’s the first impression many patients and potential employees have before choosing to step foot in the door. And yet an often-overlooked opportunity to promote the message of safety exists. How are we communicating our commitment to protecting our team and patients and what are we doing to demonstrate this?

One area in the dental office that sees the most injuries is instrument reprocessing. In terms of functionality, the sterilization area is also the heart of the practice. The moment instruments aren’t able to flow into and out of central sterilization the rest of the practice feels the impact. In addition, an exposure to contaminated instruments leading to a bloodborne infection like HIV can have long-term emotional and financial consequences. The cost of long-term care can be upwards of one-third of a million dollars. If patients are impacted, then there are additional costs associated with testing, medical consults, legal defense and managing public relations.

Fortunately, SciCan has an excellent educational resource to protect the patients, the team and the practice. SPEC asks
us to consider whether the steri-center will “improve Safety, ensure Predictable results, maximize Efficiency and maintain Compliance.”

The fact that “safety” comes first is no accident. The well-being of our team and patients should always be a priority. Would you be willing to spend $1 now to save up to $5 down the road to prevent an exposure incident and infection control breach? What if an initial investment in proper training and equipment paid for itself and positively impacted people over their lifetime?

That’s the question high-level teams should consider. The ROI in safety is backed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Safety Council. Ultimately, a steri-center with attention to preventing exposures can have immeasurable results in improved team morale and positive patient perception.

Safety is more than personal protective equipment (PPE) like utility gloves, masks, eyewear and gowns. In fact, NIOSH’s hierarchy of controls lists PPE as the last line of defense. The first step is to engineer out unsafe items and practices. This begins with a steri-center that prevents opportunities for cross-contamination and infectious exposures. The design should allow for growth and increased workflow in the future. Then, consider the best way to reprocess instruments to reduce the risk of exposure to harmful pathogens for patients and employees.

The good news is that a black belt in Lean Sigma isn’t necessary to achieve this. Proper instrument reprocessing containers minimize injuries by keeping instruments in place during cleanup and transport. They can also prolong the life
of instruments. An additional instrument transport container may be needed to further prevent possible injury until the instruments have arrived in the steri-center.

Effective sterilization requires instruments to be cleaned properly upon arrival in the steri-center. A variety of mechanical means of cleaning instruments exist and further ensures safe practices. Handpiece and ultrasonic cleaners and automated washers minimize direct contact to contaminated items compared to the days of manual scrubbing. While all the above save time, instrument washers have the added benefit of replacing presoak, rinse and drying steps.

The best way to guarantee sterility of an item that has been removed from a successful sterilization cycle is the presence and integrity of the packaging. Sterilization pouches, wraps and approved containers are commonly used and further prevent injuries to the person transporting the item. Though the instruments now meet the definition of sterile, handling noncontaminated sharps is still a concern.

Verifying chemical indicator change and confirming the packaging hasn’t been compromised should be conducted upon removing items from the sterilizer, after transport from storage and before opening chairside. As a reminder, don’t handle wet packaging and allow items to dry. Packages should be considered contaminated.
if moisture exists internally or if the packages are still wet after cooling.

Sterilization of instruments must occur in an approved sterilizer monitored routinely to ensure the outcome of safe instruments. Per the CDC, this is achieved via chemical, biological and mechanical means. Biological indicators, also known as spore tests, are considered the gold standard for challenging sterilizers for efficacy. However, these tests are typically performed one cycle each week. Mechanical and chemical monitoring should also be completed.

Mechanical and some chemical indicators (Types 1-3) don’t equate to sterile items. Type 4 indicators and, better yet, a Type 5 emulator provide immediate indication of load sterility at the end of the cycle. Chemical indicators should be used inside every package and, if not visible from the outside, must also include an internal chemical indicator. Some sterilization pouches you can buy will offer Type 4 indicators printed on both the inside and the outside of the bag so that offices can be compliant simply by using these bags. Changes in indicator color and reviewing sterilizer printouts or data should be a regular practice and can help to prevent the release of unsterilized items.

While implementing safer practices and products provides positive financial outcomes for the practice, consider the overall message: the safety of our team and patients matter. In the end, it’s not about the dollars -- it’s about the people.

For more information on SciCan’s steri-center SPECs go to: https://www.scican.com/us/scicanspec/

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