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Review Article

Paperless dentistry - The future

Mala Ram Manohar[1] Gajendra Bhansali[2]

Professor[1] ,Post-graduate student[2]
Department of Orthodontics & Dentofacial Orthopedics, College of Dental Sciences, Davangere.

Abstract:
One of the most common problems faced in dental practice management is maintaining and retrieving patient records, which is very tedious and cumbersome especially in a busy practice. This is where paperless operation comes to the rescue. It is simply a practice where all the information, diagnostic, management, and communication tools are fully integrated into one computerized system.This increases efficiency, reduces clutter, saves time, improves communication and requires less office space which is cost-effective.
As health care professionals, we should be on the cutting edge technology and provide an excellent patient experience; this is what paperless practice is!

Keywords: Paperless, practice, records, computer.

Introduction:
Technology has really made things easier. "It helps save time and money, making us more efficient. This means we're giving a better experience to the patient."[1]
The first orthodontic Paperless Practice began operation in Florida, US in 1994.[2]

What is a Paperless Practice?
Paperless operation means that electronic functions and records replace all those involving paper and, in the case of models, plaster.[3]
"Beyond paperless," is a system of "electronically following a patient through all the steps of their treatment without ever having a piece of paper to use as a guide." This means that absolutely everything—charts, appointments, phone messages, emails, and prescriptions are all only on a computer.[1]

Corresponding Author:

Dr.Gajendra Bhansali,
Post-graduate student,
Dept. of Orthodontics & Dentofacial Orthopedics
College of Dental Sciences,
E-mail Id- gajendrabhansali@gmail.com
Ph. No.- 8892396436

Need to go Paperless
To optimize efficiency, any business that deals with large amounts of information and records must eventually find better ways of using, managing, and storing that data, and dental practice falls in this business.[2]
One of the most common problems faced in practice management is maintaining of records, especially in prolonged treatment which require periodic follow-up. One way can be totally eliminating papers from practice. Keeping track of patient files and treatment records is very difficult and cumbersome in a conventional set-up. It also adds to the stress for the doctor and staff, if they cannot locate some important patient data during a busy practice, as the volume of paper records becomes unmanageable over a period of time. (Fig.1)
Another important aspects of maintaining so much records, is the amount of space that it uses up and in major cities, space have to be maintained very diligently as the office spaces are very expensive.

Advantages[3]
The major advantage of paperless operation can be summed up in just four words: ***increased functionality and efficiency.*** This is accomplished due to the following:
1. Easier access to patient records- All electronic records are available to the doctor and staff at every workstation, simultaneously as against 'single user' paper devices.
2. Records are more portable- Easy to transport patient files to a satellite office or for referral.
3. Records are more secure- As long as they are backed up

Fig 1: Voluminous records

Fig 2: Enhanced patient understanding

Fig 3: Streamlined office design

4.Improved communication capabilities- When a referring doctor or parent calls to discuss a patient, the orthodontist can go to any workstation and access all the records necessary to answer questions.
5.Reduced office space requirements- Eliminating developed x-rays, printed photos, paper treatment records, plaster models, etc. can substantially decrease the storage space required in the office.
6.Office design can be streamlined as only a computer is required at each workstation. (Fig.2)
7. More efficient use of auxiliary staff that can be used for more specialised tasks as against pulling and re-filing charts, plaster models, and x-rays.
8.Cost effectiveness- Minimal office space & staff required.
9.Enhanced emergency operation capabilities- Easy to quickly get back into operation after the catastrophic loss of an office due to fire, hurricane, etc.
10.Environment friendly- preservation of the ecosystem as paper is totally not in the picture which is eco-friendly.

Disadvantages[3]

1.Requires a larger initial investment in system hardware and/or software. The efficiency brought about by paperless operation requires having an adequate number of strategically located workstations; chair side workstations are essentially mandatory.
2.Increased workload and stress for staff during conversion process- For existing practices with a large patient base, converting to paperless operation can take a significant amount of time and effort.

Limitations:

A huge advantage of going paperless is increased understanding of patients need for undergoing dental treatment, treatment modalities, and monitoring treatment progress. Eg. it is very easy for the operator to show the patient the improvement in their profile and dentition which the patient is able to appreciate much better. (Fig.3)
An effective paperless practice carefully controls patient flow and keeps doctors and staff fully informed of each patient's location and treatment status. Procedures such as check-in, scheduling, checking out, answering treatment or billing questions etc. can take place at alternate locations, allowing the patient flow in the office to be redirected for greater efficiency. Upon arrival the patient checks in at a station in the reception area. This information is instantly relayed on the on-deck screen.
All paper records and manual system must be replaced by a central, computerised practice management program.
A tried and tested computer software company should be entrusted to provide these services.
These records include: Demographic, Diagnostic, Treatment, Scheduling and Financial. Initial investment in software and hardware is more which has to be taken into consideration and depends upon the type of company and software which you choose.[4]
Automated records should be available for access at the- Front desk, Financial/business areas, Key areas throughout the operatory, Chair side units, Satellite offices, Doctor's home.[4]

Limitations:

Some state or country laws do not allow electronic records as the only patient record. For legal reasons, certain paper documents with signatures must be retained like, financial contracts, informed consent and health questionnaires. This concern is very easily manageable and 2 or 3 paper documents might have to be maintained, which is not at all a tough task.[3]

Conclusion:

Innovation can make one a better dentist. "You spend less time doing the things that make you less productive and more time doing things that are productive."
It appears unanimous that paperless operation is cost effective, improves efficiency, and reduces stress for patients, doctor, and staff.

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