



The importance of a private patient payment area

By Kimberley Ward

Moving to your own purpose designed and built surgery is one of the largest investments many dentists will make during their professional career, and the benefits will reflect the degree of preparation undertaken. This is an opportunity for you to streamline workflows, create more storage space, improve the light quality, attract new patients and also improve a patient's flow through your practice.

The enjoyment of your space by patients is an integral element in determining the final design of your practice. Patients who enjoy your space and feel they have received great care are more likely to recommend you and upgrade treatment plans. Whilst these benefits can be hard to measure, they can fundamentally change your day-to-day experience. As such, patient comfort and experience should be a major influencing factor in the final design of your practice.

By incorporating small touches throughout, you can show that you have thought about your patient's needs and made your space more welcoming to new and old patients alike. Just as including coat hooks, tissues and mirrors are a patient courtesy, incorporating a private payment area can greatly increase patient comfort levels by offering a place to discuss treatment plans, make payments and book in subsequent appointments away from the busy reception area. Providing a private payment area that is deliberately separated from the front desk area also ensures that staff are able to provide patients with their full attention. The theory is this: patients who feel more comfortable and respected during their visit are far more likely to accept the treatment plans presented.

A private payment area also works to address issues of medical privacy and financial privacy. I know I've been in the



situation at my GP where I've overheard the receptionist discussing private medical information, providing details on how to get to the specialist they had been referred to, and what to expect on the day... and none of it sounded overly pleasant. I can't tell you how embarrassed I was for this lady, so I swore I would never go back there again!

Sorting out financial arrangements can also prove to be an unpleasant experience. Credit card payments can be rejected for any number of reasons, and if you've ever had this happen to you, you understand how embarrassing it can be - particularly if handled in a busy reception area! And with some treatment plans costing in the tens of thousands of dollars, it's fair to assume that many people will require appointments to be booked as determined by their individual cash flow. When they are making payments they can be quite large amounts. Providing a dedicated area for these discussions can alleviate some of this tension and make the whole experience less uncomfortable.

The decision to include a private payment area can also successfully address the issue of front desk overcrowding. When determining the patient flow through your practice, it is extremely beneficial to direct incoming and outgoing patients to their own area. A good floor plan will reduce congestion, staff and patient stress, whilst increasing efficiency and productivity. By separating the reception 'welcome counter' from the 'outgoing/payment' area, you are acknowledging the needs of your patients, relieving their anxiety and treating them with great respect... a great way to build your practice and ensure continued growth!

Including a separate payment area in the design of your new practice is best included in your brief, so that the additional space required to accommodate this feature can be incorporated into the floor plan. Depending on the site and space availability, it can be an integral part of a curved, straight or angled desk form. Your designer will also need to factor in the requirements

of additional power, data and telephone points for EFTPOS and HICAPS. Other design considerations include the incorporation of a slender cash drawer if necessary and the placement of computer terminals and printers for the administration staff.

In most cases, the private payment area works best when it is located adjacent to or adjoining the reception desk. This facilitates an intuitive flow through the practice for your patient and allows your reception and admin staff to swing around or move easily between the two areas, increasing efficiency. A clear physical barrier between the reception desk and the payment area for audible privacy is important; a space where patients can be seen but not heard is the aim. Visual privacy is not so critical here.

To achieve this, glass doors or a screening panel can be incorporated into the design between the reception area and clinical areas, with the payment desk located just behind the doors or panel on the clinical side. The payment desk then becomes their last stop before leaving the clinical area, and then subsequently the practice.



Some practices with higher staffing levels and specific set-ups in clinical rooms allow for the assistant to stay in the room with the patient, make further appointments as necessary and take payment of accounts. This creates a very personalised service, with patients remaining in closed room comfort for procedures and transactions, before exiting the practice.

Having a chair or stool for patient comfort at the payment area can be beneficial to patient perception of service. This makes payment a consultative desk transaction rather than a standing across counter transaction. The difference in patient perception of service between the options is substantial.

Keep in mind that a successful practice will want to ensure a patient feels positive about the service they receive as they are much happier to pay their account and recommend the practice - always a benefit to the bottom line!

About the Author

Kimberley Ward is Business Development and Marketing Manager, for Levitch Design Associates, one of Australia's leading healthcare interior design consultancies who offer an integrated approach to practice presentation. Custom corporate identity solutions, brand development, graphic / web design, promotional strategies and marketing campaigns are some of the service provided. For more information, contact (02) 9880-9300 or visit www.levitch.com.au