

Dental management - working with a spouse

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Most doctors shuddered at the thought of working with their spouses in a dental office. All too often, they think working together means spending 24 hours a day with the same person and having, on a daily basis, confrontations similar to those that occur when a husband and wife wallpaper together. The usual refrain, to the suggestion is, "I love my wife, but I sure don't want to work with her".

The myth that spouses cannot successfully work together in dentistry is long standing, erroneous and costly. This faulty thinking is needlessly robbing many professionals of a significant resource, restricting the success potential of their practices, and denying couples the joy of working together.

It's time to set the record straight.

Of all the times a spouse can enter a practice, the easiest time is at the beginning of a new practice. Many of the staff and patient adjustment obstacles don't exist because there is no staff or patients. The only challenge is for the spouses to adjust to each other. When a spouse joins a practice at a later date, there are adjustments to be made. Armed with the knowledge of their existence and suggestions on how to overcome them, however, the transition can be made relatively smooth and easy.

Successfully working with a spouse is a skill that requires some learning. Preparation, flexibility and practice are essential to reap the substantial benefits. It is important to recognize that when a spouse enters a practice at any time other than the beginning, there are different relationship situations for which to be prepared: spouse to spouse, spouse to staff, and spouse to patient.

Spouse to spouse

The working relationship will be doomed to failure unless certain ground rules are laid.

The first step is to establish the extent to which the spouse will be involved in the practice.

A part-time participant will interact with the practice and staff differently than a full-timer, and will experience different challenges, both at the office and at home. If the spouse has not worked outside of the home for a while, or if the commitment to the time spent at the practice is greater than that given to other jobs, it will be necessary to determine how the household obligations will be met. A well-conceived plan will make the transition easier for everyone.

Just as at home it is important that an office division of areas of responsibility and authority to be established. Two people can never both be in charge of the same area. It's like both trying to drive the same car at the same time; it just doesn't work. A division of responsibilities will significantly reduce the chance for arguments between the spouses and provide clarity for the staff. For those offices where the spouse is not a dental professional, a natural division of authority is "clinical" and "administrative" with the spouse assuming the administrative functions.

The couples involved will determine exactly how responsibilities will be divided. Once you have come to an agreement, be certain to advise the staff. The more the staff knows about how the spouse is joining the practice, and how it relates to them, the easier the transition.

When you work with your spouse day in and day out, there is a real temptation to discuss household subjects at the office. Unless you want everyone to know your personal business, resist the temptation. When you walk through the door of the office, it's best if you leave your husband/wife personas outside, and assumes your professional demeanor. Treat each other with the courtesy and consideration due a co-worker. Beware that all-too-common behavior of being hardest on the one you love the most. You are not husband and wife at the office, but rather, two professionals there to get a job done. A discussion of home issues, bickering or a show of intimacy are out of place and uncomfortable for all observers.

The way any given day plays out will have a significant impact upon a person's mood, energy level and temperament. Actually observing your loved one experiencing a particularly hard day gives one a grater appreciation for how that person feels, which leads to a greater understanding when either of you are short-tempered or don't feel like going to an in-law's house for dinner.

It is ironic how much you actually miss your spouse. Once you get in the groove of working together, you will find that you become so focused on the job at hand that you rarely see each other at the office. You're both too busy doing your respective jobs. Even when you think you are going to take breaks or lunches together, it rarely happens. It seems there is always an emergency appointment, a phone call, or other interruption that eats into the time. And when you return to your home, because you so intimately share your work, you will find that many of your conversations will be about work, the staff, and the patients, which new ideas are working and which are not. There will be times when you feel as though you spent enough time with the doctor or co-worker, but haven't seen your sweetheart for a long time. Vacations become even more special. They are not just times to get away from the stresses of work, but they are also times to re-bound as husband and wife.

A special camaraderie develops between a husband and wife who work together. It is similar to the camaraderie that develops between couples when they become parents. Just as in raising children. Both people are instrumental in the growth and development of the practice. There will be times when you will want to pull your hair out in frustration, and other times when you will want to jump for joy. You will share all the disappointments and successes on a level usually reserved for comrades who go through an experience together, and you will be closer because of it.

Spouse to staff

The greatest challenge to having a spouse join the practice is frequently staff acceptance. The staff's reaction to the addition of a spouse will be feelings of suspicion and resentment. Each person will be wondering just how it will affect his job. Will the added spouse be help or a hindrance to getting a work accomplished? Are they acquiring a team member, a mother or the stereotyped doctor's wife with her assumed perks and privileges? The spouse of a doctor is not, and cannot, be the same as the other employees. He or she fills a unique position on the dental team

with unique responsibilities. The first challenge will be to gain staff acceptance and respect and a definition of role.

In observing those situations in which spouses have successfully integrated into an existing practice, a pattern of behavior is apparent that may serve as a guide:

1. Learn the business

Every office has a routine of operation both in the clinical and in the administrative areas. It is important to learn the existing routine, and reasons why things are done the way they are done. It demonstrates to the staff a desire to understand and appreciate the job they have been doing and it alleviates some of their initial fears that everything will be different right away. Guard against the impulse to simplify the task of routines. What often appears initially to be a complex operation for a simple task is truly the simplest means to accomplish the desired result. Observe, ask questions and learn.

2. Make changes slowly

There is a natural desire to make an impact on the office, to improve it in some manner. Impact and improvement usually go hand-in-hand with change, and change is uncomfortable for most people. Doing things the way they have always been done is familiar, comfortable and easy. To do things differently will be viewed as awkward and time consuming. Make changes slowly and involve the staff in planning the changes. Their knowledge and years of experience will prove to be a valuable resource and their involvement will spark an enthusiasm to implement the changes.

3. Keep a regular schedule

For a practice to function at an optimum level, dependability is required from all who work in it. The success of the practice rests on certain personnel being present and effective for the job at hand. Just as the doctor and staff keep a set work schedule, so must the working spouse. An indefinite or sporadic schedule has no redeeming features. It not only causes the staff to doubt the spouse's dedication to the practice, but also places the spouse in a position viewed as privileged by the staff. To ensure the spouse's effectiveness, decide on a work schedule and adhere to it.

4. Set the standard

The presence of a spouse in the office carries with it an unspoken responsibility - that of setting or upholding the standard of behavior. The staff will look at the behavior of the spouse for the clues on how to pattern their own style. Without a word

being spoken, they will recognize what is important and what is trivial. Values such as punctuality, steadfastness, professionalism in speech and dress, perseverance, courtesy, honesty, integrity and fairness will be perceived without a word been spoken. Everything the spouse says and does will be observed and noted. The staff will quickly follow the example the spouse sets. If you want your staff to be friendly, hard working and dedicated so must you be.

5. Share information

The more staff knows about the spouse's role in the office, the easier will be for them to respond. Help them understand how you will be working together. Share the goals and plans for the practice and describe how all of you fit into the picture. Be as specific as possible. Advise the staff prior to making changes in the spouse's role or schedule. It eliminates unwanted surprises and makes transition easier.

6. Recognize the caliber of the staff and comment on it

Much of the success the practice has experienced is due to the superb staff in place. Recognition of their contribution to the practice will always be an appreciated and will create an environment of mutual respect.

Spouse to patient

Patients generally welcome a spouse into a practice as a pleasant addition and a readily available resource who can satisfy their needs. Patients are content to be serviced by any of the members of the dental team for most of the transitions that occur in the office. There are instances, however, when a patient has a concern or a complaint that he or she feels is so important that it requires the direct attention of the doctor or someone

with authority to take action. Being the doctor's spouse carries with it that implied authority and patients find it reassuring. The prompt attention of the doctor's spouse validates the importance of their concern and makes them feel confident that the problem will receive the prompt time and attention it deserves.

The spouse will sometime be sought as an intermediary between the doctor and the patient. It is usually in these situations in which a patient would like to say something to the doctor but is either too shy or embarrassed to do so. Changes in medical history (i.e. teenage pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases) may be particularly difficult for some patients to vocalize. The presence of a spouse in which the patient may confide is comforting for the patient and helpful for the doctor. Making patients feel special and a part of the family is key to a successful dental practice. The economics of running a profitable dental office unfortunately dictate that the doctor spend as much time as possible in the rendering of patient care and greatly restrict the personal time he is able to devote to his patients. A spouse is usually under less rigid time constraints and can spend a few minutes in the little chit-chat that so many people enjoy. These light and friendly conversations create an atmosphere that is enjoyable and pleasantly memorable. It takes some learning and adjustment to successfully work with your spouse but the rewards are well worth the effort. A spouse's vest interest will raise the level of the practice's success. Unprecedented attention will be paid to unfilled appointments, uncollected account receivables and needless expenses, and safeguards will be devised to prevent them, resulting in a greater profit. You will become each other's greatest cheerleaders in the good times and sounding boards when things are not quite working out as planned. And you will have the fun that comes with succeeding.