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messages and e-mail reminders. If worded correctly these are an essential tool for reducing FTA rates. Firstly, a little exercise: read a short sentence and I invite you to observe what you notice.

'Do not think of a blue hippopotamus.' What did you notice? Even though I told you not to, you briefly created an image of a blue hippopotamus in your mind's eye.

How does this relate to text and e-mail reminders? I have seen several examples recently where the texts read:

'Do not forget your appointment...'

'Please don't miss your appointment'

'If you want to reschedule your appointment...'

Unwittingly what the text is doing is directing your patients' attention to do exactly the opposite of what you want them to do.

Instead your messages should read:

'Remember your appointment'

'Looking forward to you keeping your appointment...'

Moving forward, what will it mean to your practice now you have improved the wording on your texts and e-mails?

3: ESTABLISH A REGULAR PATTERN OF BEHAVIOUR

Every year from the age of 14 right up until my finals, I would take my exams in the

summer and spend May bank holidays revising. Even now, 20 years on, I still get a twinge that I should be studying on a May bank holiday, so deeply ingrained is the association.

It is useful to establish similar patterns of behaviour with your patients so that their examination appointments are always every May and November. Over time,

the link between certain times of year and going to see you will become embedded.

Other behaviours that can be established are:

- Seeing the hygienist every three months
- Always booking the next appointment before they leave
- Making them all up front for the same day and time each week if the patient has a number of appointments to make
- Taking payment up front.

4: MAKE YOUR PRACTICE A FUN PLACE TO BE

Have you ever gone out for a fantastic dinner, but been served by miserable waiting staff? Do you go back? I suspect not.

And yet I am sure you have also been to other restaurants where the food is mediocre, but the staff delightful and the atmosphere so inviting that you go back time and time again? True?

It is the same for your patients. No matter how excellent your clinical skills are, if the customer service is poor the patients will not come in. We created an environment in my practice where patients would just pop in even if they did not have an appointment because they liked being there.

How will you know that you have made your practice a place where your patients want to be? Measure your progress.

MAKE YOUR PATIENTS FEEL AT HOME

Remember their name

Smile and greet them in a really friendly and welcoming manner

Make eye contact

Remember things about them

Send them birthday and anniversary cards

Provide magazines of interest to them

Offer refreshments

MEASURE YOUR PROGRESS

Whatever your current level of FTAs and LCs, I invite you to monitor it and create a chart to record your scores month by month. Experience shows that when you measure something it begins to change.

Notice what is working well and do more of it. Establish desired outcomes for all your practice management systems, monitor where you are, implement the changes, evaluate what happens and keep repeating the process until you reach your goal.

5: LINKED APPOINTMENTS

Most people live really busy lives filled with work, family hobbies and day to day stuff. Coming to the dentist often takes a large chunk of time out of our patients' day even if we are running to time. A short 20-minute appointment may mean two hours to the patient when you build in travel time, paperwork, buying sundries and making payments.

Help reduce your patient's time commitments and block-booked appointments by offering:

- Family bookings
- Joint hygiene and dentist visits.

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