Maintaining Confidentiality of Patient Records

The Patient Record

The patient record is organized in a specific order to allow the dental team to move from the patient's personal information, to the diagnostic findings, and then to the documentation of treatment. Information-gathering forms are completed by the patient with the help of the business assistant before any treatment is provided. These forms include the following:

- Patient registration form
- Medical/dental health history form
- Medical alert information form
- Consent forms

Once the patient is seated in the dental chair, the dental assistant or the dental hygienist, along with the dentist, will complete the following diagnostic information-gathering forms:

- Physical examination form
- Radiographic examination form
- Clinical examination form

After the dental exam is complete, the dentist will formulate an assessment of oral health status. An assessment is the process of collecting data and then evaluating or drawing conclusions from the findings. At this time, the dentist will complete the following:

- Assess a patient's dental health by completing a comprehensive examination.
- Review all significant findings.
- Present a diagnosis to the patient.
- Develop and document a treatment plan with input from the patient.
- Schedule a series of appointments by which to complete treatment in a timely manner.
Best Practices

The right to privacy or confidentiality is central to the conduct of dental professionals. Patients have the right to have their conversations with dental professionals kept confidential. Dental professionals have legally protected rights to keep those conversations private as well. Healthcare professionals must be very careful to never reveal personal information about a patient, whether at work or outside the office. Dental staff should not have conversations about patients at any time, especially at the front desk or in other areas where other patients may hear what is being said.

No information about a patient may be released unless by direct authority of the patient. Conflicts can arise regarding confidentiality, however. For example, most states have laws requiring health professionals to report suspected cases of abuse. In these cases, a patient’s right to have personal information kept confidential may give way to legal mandates, such as in cases of child or older-adult abuse. In addition, although not legally required to do so, dental professionals may feel the ethical obligation to assist in cases of suspected spousal or partner abuse.