

Building Your Practice With an Intraoral Video Camera

Roger P. Levin, DDS
Private General Practice
Baltimore, Maryland

Dentistry, as a profession, is changing and advancing at a faster rate than ever. In efforts to prepare practices for the dynamics of the 1990s, professional researchers are developing new techniques and equipment that will provide opportunities for growth and greater success. One of the most important and promising recent developments is the intraoral video camera, a development which enables the dentist to communicate with the patient more visually than before. An intraoral video camera is an advanced micro-camera system that allows the dentist to project any intraoral or facial image on a color monitor, store that image on a computer disk for easy recall, and produce a high-quality Polaroid photograph of the image with the date, time, any notations, and the doctor's name.

Communication

Communication is a major factor in the development of the dentist-patient relationship, a relationship that takes time to develop. It takes time for the dentist to understand a patient's needs and concerns and for the patient to develop confidence in and build a rapport with the dentist and staff. This process involves

communication of many kinds. It includes not only the dentist's explanation of the treatment that the patient needs, but the patient's acceptance of the recommendations.

Suppose the dentist says to a patient, "You have a fractured filling and need a crown." The patient may wonder how badly fractured the tooth is and whether it can be patched. The dentist then has to do his or her best to describe the condition of the tooth. The skilled communicator will be able to create a mental picture of the situation. But this process can often be time-consuming and does not necessarily result in an affirmative response. Thus, the dentist wants to utilize any technique that can help patients better understand and visualize their condition and need for treatment.

Communication and the Intraoral Video Camera

For years dentists have explained problems to patients. They have used props and shown samples of treatment results such as models or before-and-after photographs. Although these communication tools have often been effective, most dentists can find, in their active-patient files, many instances of untreated oral pathology.

An intraoral video camera is a piece of technology that, when used properly, helps the patient understand the immediate need for treatment. It enhances the dentist's ability to build positive relations in a shorter time period. It is an instrument that communicates an image of leadership. The potential for referrals and practice growth is enormous,

because for the first time, the patient will really understand his or her needs.

Intraoral Video Camera and Practice Building

Many dentists who are now using an intraoral video camera system report significant gains in practice goals. These include: 1) Increases in case acceptance; 2) Increases in practice productivity; 3) Increases in new patients and referrals; 4) Increases in staff motivation and retention; and 5) Decreases in time needed for treatment consultation. A 1989 survey by Health Care Advancements, a dental management and marketing firm, found that more than 90% of all practices that are using the intraoral video cameras have experienced at least three out of five of the above benefits.¹ In addition, there is a greater than 90% owner satisfaction rate. Dentists who have committed themselves to intraoral video cameras have reported improvement in the quality of their services and growth in their practices.

Increasing New Patient Confidence and Referrals

It has been well documented that intraoral video cameras will increase a dentist's level of patient-treatment acceptance.¹ Patients become more aware of their needs when they see their mouths on the monitor and their interest level immediately rises. The burden of describing in words each patient's problems is lessened for the dentist. With an intraoral video camera, the patient is able to visualize what the dentist is talking about.

With the aid of an intraoral video camera, the dentist becomes a tour guide of the mouth. It is a role that, eventually, a staff member can perform in the initial stages of the examination. The dentist only needs to demonstrate, in excellent color clarity, the present condition of the patient's mouth and point out obvious problems. The tour of the mouth consultation should be part of the initial workup. As soon as patients see that they have oral problems such as worn-out amalgams, erosion, periodontal disease, tilted, fractured, rotated teeth, or caries, the patient will understand clearly the need for treatment. The dentist should be aware that the patient should be given time to make decisions regarding proposed treatment.

It is clear that an intraoral video camera provides the dentist with the technology to meet the needs of patients more completely, and simultaneously improves the treatment plan acceptance rate. Patients will be psychologically impressed that for the first time they can see an exact color image of their existing oral problems. That experience is a positive one for patients, and they will believe that a practice that can identify problems using a sophisticated visual scan will also be able to treat those needs effectively. So the initial benefits include complete patient realization of oral needs and the development, on the part of the patient, of confidence in the dentist's ability to provide optimal solutions.

The next step is for the dentist to collect the necessary diagnostic data to work up the case. However, this is also the time to further the dentist-patient relationship and to discuss all aspects of the benefits of an intraoral video camera.

The fact sheet provided by the manufacturer will act to give the patient the exact information about the use of an intraoral video camera, so that the patient can relate the name and function of the system. It is a wise practice for the dentist to print his or her name on the fact sheet because,

in many cases, it will be passed on to others.

Intraoral Video Cameras and Case Acceptance

This article has already explored the benefits of intraoral video cameras in the diagnostic phase and seen that it can boost the quality and productivity of any practice. Perhaps the greatest benefit to the dentist using this type of camera is to motivate patients to accept treatment.

The treatment plan presentation is the culmination of the preparatory period, which includes the development of the relationship, the building of confidence, and the clinical diagnosis. This is the time during which the dentist helps the patient to consider all factors and to choose the best treatment plan. The dentist's ability to explain why specific treatment is recommended will be facilitated by the visual presentation.

The dentist can fully display the patient's mouth on the intraoral video camera color screen. This technique for involving the patient offers a complete understanding of the need for the specific treatment recommended. The patient can see exactly why a treatment plan is suggested. Being able to make decisions on the basis of what the patient can see gives a greater feeling of sharing in matters concerning his or her oral health. Naturally, people are more interested and positive when they are committed and responsible. An intraoral video camera benefits both the patient, who has more of an opportunity to understand his or her needs and to share in decisions regarding those needs, and the dentist, who will experience a higher treatment acceptance rate and enhance his or her reputation as an advanced practitioner.

Five Steps of Treatment Plan Acceptance

Recognizing the Need. The dentist should look for any problems involving patients' mouths or dentitions. These problems

should be pointed out on the screen. The dentist should help patients to recognize abnormalities.

Focusing the Consultation. The dentist often needs to guide the patient in the decision-making process. Dentists can use the camera to help patients analyze treatment options by pointing out the various reasons that treatment is needed.

Questions Lead to Decisions. The more questions asked by the patient, the better. Questions, which will emanate from the experience, lead to a higher patient commitment for improved oral health.

Presenting Solutions. This is where the dentist presents the case. The intraoral video camera has helped prepare patients and aids in justifying the dentist's fees.

Operative Treatment Planning. Most professionals ignore this important step. The dentist should show patients, on the screen, the final results along with the before-treatment images. It will reinforce excellence, motivate referrals, and intensify the doctor-patient relationship.

Intraoral Video Cameras and Practice Marketing

Once treatment is complete, the intraoral video camera system should be used again by the dentist. This time the dentist makes a postoperative presentation to assure patient satisfaction. Demonstrating the final result on the screen has a number of benefits for the dentist. The patients can see the entire intraoral result buccally, facially, and lingually. The patient also has the opportunity to see the improvement from their original condition. The patient's future treatment needs will be better understood in advance of the treatment plan consultation. The patient will be able to respond to the dentist's treatment best when he or she sees the results on the screen. Also, the final picture will reinforce the benefits of treatment. This reinforcement acts to motivate patients to tell their families and

friends about the intraoral video camera system and the treatment, and enables them to explain what the dentist actually did. This type of discussion will reveal any dissatisfaction or questions on the part of the patient, and reduces the likelihood of a legal action.

The intraoral video camera system can also produce Polaroid-type photographs. These can be used as permanent records or as marketing aids just after the initial consultation appointment.

Summary

The intraoral video camera has proven to be an asset to every practice surveyed.¹ As private dentists encounter new challenges from HMOs and a decline in traditional service needs, they will need an edge in order to be successful in the 1990s. For the dentists who are using intraoral video cameras, this edge has resulted in new patients, growth in acceptance of treatment plans, and increased productivity.

In most practices, only 20% of the patients actively refer. In practices that feature an intraoral video camera, it is not uncommon to find that the active referral rate has risen to 40% or higher.¹

Dentistry's goal is to provide excellent care and good oral health. To reach this goal, a dentist needs more than just technical skill. Communication is essential for dentists who seek productive practices. Patients want to understand their needs and can develop their own goals for achieving good health.

REFERENCE

1. Health Care Advancements, Baltimore, Maryland 21208