



Minimise the effects of flu season on your practice

By Simon Palmer

Winter time is upon us and that means flu season. Flu season is no fun for anyone – especially the sick. For businesses it causes a huge amount of stress and loss of productivity every year. Most practices would consider employee sickness as an unavoidable part of having a business and just cope as best they can when it happens. The smarter business person may look at the negative impacts flu season has on their business and ways to put steps in place to minimise these.

What are the impacts of flu season on a dental practice?

The negative impacts of flu season on a business are due to employee absenteeism and its knock on effects. This is most felt in a dental practice when one of the dentists gets sick.

When a dentist calls in sick:

- Your practice will usually have to reappoint patients at the last minute, as you are unlikely to get much notice;
- This will likely create disappointed and frustrated patients who need to have their treatment postponed;
- Paid auxiliary staff who usually work with the (now sick) dentist are unable to work (even though they will need to be paid for this time) and are idle in the practice;
- Other dentists in the practice can become be overworked trying to see the sick dentist's patients;
- There will obviously be a loss of practice production and as the practice's fixed expenses are offset against less production, the practice overhead expense percentages go up;

There is no doubt that having someone call in sick is stressful for everyone involved at the practice and everyone (especially the sick person) wishes it wouldn't happen.

How to limit the impact of flu season on your practice?

There are a few things that you can do to limit the impact of this year's flu season on your practice.

1. Encourage flu vaccinations for members of your practice every year. Some employers offer to pay for the vaccination for staff (around \$20 each) or subsidise them.
2. Discourage "Presenteeism" when an employee is obviously sick. Presenteeism is a term used to describe a situation where employees come to work in spite of illness.

Many employees may think that it shows dedication and work ethic to come to work even when you are not well. However, this Presenteeism presents several undesirable costs to a business:

- An employee who arrives at work despite illness may only operate at a fraction of his or her normal capacity despite requiring the same expenditure in wages, social contributions and taxes as an employee operating at 100%;
 - They may be more prone to mistakes;
 - In the case of contagious diseases (e.g. influenza), they may transmit the illness to fellow employees, potentially multiplying the impacts to the business several times over;
 - Patients visiting a dental practice that sees staff exhibiting obvious signs of illness could get a poor perception of the hygiene protocol within the practice.
3. If you have a multi dentist practice, rather than living in dread through the winter hoping that one of the dentists working at your practice will not get sick, assume that one of your dentists will get sick at short notice this winter and get prepared! Trial a locum dentist for a few days at the beginning of winter each year when no one is sick. That way, when one of your dentists does fall sick for a few days you are:
- a. Confident in how to set up the work for a locum dentist (legals, remuneration, etc);
 - b. Have confidence in the abilities of a dentist in the area that is available for locum work at short notice.

Dentist Job Search has many quality locum candidates that may be able to cover for you at short notice.

Many private practitioners will prefer to shut their practice rather than take on a locum to cover for them as they are worried about the liability that an unknown and untested dentist can introduce into a practice. This is understandable if the locum dentist is going to be in the practice by themselves. However, when an employee dentist needs to be temporarily replaced by a locum the risks can be easily managed and minimised.

Dentist Job Search Locum Dentist Risk Management:

1. **Trial a locum dentist** for a few days in advance if possible:
 - at the beginning of winter each year when no one is sick,
 - Well before someone is going on planned leave.
2. **Check references thoroughly:** as with all employee dentists, you should ask for and check all references thoroughly.
3. **Check in yourself:** if your locum is to replace an employee dentist or to replace yourself when you are in town, but unable to practice for some reason, there is the option of checking-in on the dentist yourself.
4. **Check in by others:** if the locum will be temporarily replacing one of many dentists within a practice you can set the expectation up front that the locum position will be one that is supervised.
5. Have a written **legal agreement** in place restricting their work to only maintenance and procedures that cannot wait until your return to practice. If in doubt as to their abilities or diagnostic criteria, you can restrict their crown and bridge or indirect restorative work.

{This article published mid 2009}