



Compulsory Continuing Education is coming: Burden or Opportunity?

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On July 1st 2010, dental board registration is due to become nationalised. When it does, it is almost certain that a dentist's annual registration renewals will be contingent on them meeting minimum levels of continuing education every year. For the first time for most dentists and dental practices in Australia, doing continuing education courses will go from being voluntary to being compulsory.

While I am sure many practices will complain about the increased burden this represents to them, the smarter practitioners will embrace this change, and not just because it is necessary in order for the industry to maintain high standards.

The way dentists comply with this new requirement will fall into two categories.

1. Some dentists, who do the minimum to maintain registration and are always scrambling at the end of the assessment period to find a course, any course that will help them fulfil their requirements to continue practicing.
2. The dentists who look at this requirement strategically as a way to grow the practice in the direction that they want to take it.

If you want to be in this second category then you need to look at where ideally you want your practice to be in the next few years and critically look at the deficits in your skill base and that of other dentists in your practice.

One question you should ask yourself is what clinical skills your practice is missing.

Hopefully all practices are doing their current general practice work to a high standard and a practice owner should be keeping a close eye to make sure that this is always the case.

A more strategic-thinking dentist will also be looking at the clinical work that the practice currently can't service because it doesn't have the skills and needs to refer out to another practice. Possibly your practice is referring out a lot of one type of specialised work. Having a dentist in the practice spend their (or your) continuing education hours so that you can keep this work in house would be a great way to grow your practice.

Another question you should ask yourself is what skills the dentists in your practice are missing as leaders, managers and communicators.

A mistake many dentists make is to think that only the principal dentist needs to have good leadership and people management skills. This is almost certainly way off the mark. All dentists in a practice need to have excellent leadership, management, and communication skills in order for the practice to be operating at its peak.

- All dentists are by job description in a place of some leadership in a dental practice.
- Almost all dentists need to be able to give direction and manage (to some extent) patients, as well as auxiliary staff.

- All dentists need to be able to effectively communicate treatment plans and handle patient's concerns
- All dentists need to be able to effectively communicate with difficult patients

Even if an employee/contractor dentist's job description restricts their leadership role in the practice, to the rest of the community they are in positions of authority in the practice and need to know how to act accordingly.

Leadership, management and communication skills like these are instinctive to very few. For the rest of us, we start at various levels of incompetence and need training in order to consistently provide these skills at a high level.

Once you know what skills you need at your practice – how do you implement.

While you can steer your personal continuing education as you see fit, how do you steer that of the other dentists within your practice? There are several solutions to this:

1. The practice could offer to pay for the dentists training that the practice feels is needed.
2. The practice could offer to subsidise courses that the owner believes would be of help to the practice.
3. A comprehensive practice management programme could be undertaken which would address the all of the communication, leadership and management skill shortages in the practice through courses and coaching.

By providing any of these three solutions a practice is not only strategically using the compulsory continuing education to grow the practice, it is making its dentists remuneration package much more attractive without increasing their commission percentage.

Like it or not compulsory continuing education is coming soon for dentists in Australia. When it does all practices are going to have to decide how to respond. Either the practice will:

- Ignore the issue as long as the dentists maintain their registration with the dental board OR
- Strategically use it to ensure the practice grows to the next level.

Which will it be for your practice?

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