

Tennis Anyone?
By Laura Jamison
Jamison Consulting, Inc.

This time of year it seems that many eyes are watching Wimbledon and then the U.S. Open. Tennis can be such a fantastic sport to get caught up in if only by catching it on TV. I often use a canister for tennis balls in my seminars to demonstrate an important point when it comes to appointment scheduling. I like to draw parallels to something we can all relate to and I hope you can visualize this as it is described.

First, take a tennis canister and place a tennis ball, three golf balls and a bag of black eyed peas in there. It all fits neatly. Now, empty the contents into a plastic bag. I suggest a person hold the tennis ball and each golf ball, leaving someone holding the bag of black eyed peas. Next, have the peas poured into the canister, then place the golf balls back in. What's happened? No room for the tennis ball.... But why is that?

Let's relate this to appointment scheduling. When you fill the daily schedule with "black eyed peas" and "golf balls" there is no room for the "tennis ball". In many offices the "tennis ball" is the procedure or multiple procedures that are highly productive and the "black eyed peas" are the appointments that are necessary to schedule but typically are not charged for. Of course, the "golf balls" are the appointments that fall in the middle such as your new patient exam, a single composite restoration, etc.

In order to prevent overflow of the canister, it is necessary to preblock the schedule every day. This requires saving a portion of time on the scheduler for specific procedures and offering these appointments only to patients who are in need of that particular procedure. Many computer programs allow you to color code this specific time set aside. Appointments that can be preblocked could include high production appointments, new patient examinations, consultations and even scaling and root planning on the hygienists schedule. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

The only obstacle to overcome is finding the patients to fill those spots. This can be made easier by asking for help in the morning huddle. I suggest that you inform the whole team at the start of the day of when your next available production block is. A hygienist can help. An emergency patient can be redirected to this appointment instead of being seen for definitive treatment. In the end, your patients will be grateful that you have saved time for their procedures and they are able to be seen as soon as possible.

I also believe in verbal skills. I don't leave home without them. If the patient says, "I can come in anytime after 4:00", who is in control? Instead start by offering the patient a benefit statement and then two choices of appointment times. It would look like this. "So that we can deliver your impression to the lab as soon as possible, we reserve time for the first stage of the bridge first thing in the morning. Would 8:00 on Wednesday or 9:00 on Thursday be better for you?" Patients respond to choices. It is actually more difficult to answer the question, "When would you like to come in?" Think about it.

Tennis would not be as exciting without keeping score so there must be a daily goal. Goal setting is made easy now with a software program called Revenue Planner™ developed by Dennis Munholand, D.D.S., M.B.A. I have recommended its use for several years now and we have integrated it into teaching how to use it in our business seminar called Beyond Your Bottom Line. This two day session offered November 11-12, 2005 in Tampa, Florida is the best seminar of its kind for the purpose of learning about setting goals for the practice and more importantly, how to achieve the goals.

Practicing the right way to play is vital to winning in tennis. In the practice we call it role playing. It is important to take time to role play the verbal skills for controlling the appointment system. Also, consider hiring a pro to watch how you are putting your daily schedule together to be sure that you are not reinforcing incorrect mechanics which only perfect bad habits. The result – you are able to be sure that you are having fun while remaining productive.