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### **Digital Recordkeeping Streamlines Pediatric Dentist's Practice**

*Franklin A. Pace, D.M.D., a pediatric dentist in private practice in Tallahassee, is one of a growing number of dental professionals who are using state-of-the-art software to make their practices paperless.*

Advances in materials and technology have dramatically changed the way dentists treat patients. Composite fillings have replaced amalgam fillings. Digital radiography has supplanted film-based x-rays. Dental implants have revolutionized the function of dentures. Advances in nearly every aspect of dentistry have provided results faster and with more comfort, convenience, function, aesthetics, healthfulness and predictability. Perhaps the one exception to this continuing improvement involves the administrative side of practicing dentistry.

From the medical history forms and insurance forms a patient fills out, to the radiographs and specialists' reports often used to design the patient's treatment, to the forms used to document that treatment, a single patient's chart can quickly expand to include dozens of pages of information. Multiplied by hundreds of patients in a single practice, it is easy to see how just one dental office can quickly be overwhelmed with thousands upon thousands of pieces of paper, many of which must be updated by hand and all of which are susceptible to loss or damage.

In recent years, many dentists have transitioned from paper-based practices to paperless ones. Such is the case with Franklin A. Pace, D.M.D. His practice, Tallahassee

Pediatric Dentistry at Summit Ridge, has eliminated all paper forms in favor of digital ones.

Dr. Pace uses PT Dental software for his paperless office forms and online patient registration. "In addition to being user-friendly for the patients and the staff," he says, "it also synchronized really well with Eaglesoft, which is the dental practice management software I use."

While many dental offices claim to be paperless, they still fill out paper forms by hand, and then scan them into the computer to make a digital document. "That information has to be retyped or reentered by the dental staff," explains Dr. Pace, "so it's not really a time-saving step. The nice thing about the PT Dental software is that most fields entered by the patient can be automatically entered into the practice management software without double entry."

### **STREAMLINING SERVICE**

The all-digital concept Dr. Pace envisioned for his practice was one that would begin at the time a new patient and his or her parent first stepped into the dentist's office. "They don't sign a sign-in sheet; they go to a tablet computer and actually write using a stylus," he says. "They sign in their child and then start filling out the forms by either checking *yes* or *no*, or actually writing a short answer. They then sign the forms digitally on the same screen.

"In the back office, all our charting and recordkeeping documentation originates in digital form and is stored on the computer. I think that's what truly differentiates a paperless office from an office which is scanning paper forms and saying they're paperless."

He acknowledges that going from a paper-based dental practice to a truly paperless practice can be an intimidating move. "It's a huge step because, as with any technology, there is a learning curve," says Dr. Pace. "Current technology allows a paperless concept to work practically, and the learning curve has been minimized tremendously. I see a lot of interest in going digital among my dental colleagues, and I think it's the wave of the future because most of the hospitals and health centers are going paperless."

### **BENEFITS**

Maintaining a paperless practice has many benefits. For the staff, one of the biggest benefits is speed. "There is instantaneous access of information throughout the office," says Dr. Pace. "If information is entered at one point in the office, it's easily accessible right away by another staff member at another point in the office."

Dr. Pace and his staff wanted to see firsthand the benefits paperless technology would bring to their practice, so they conducted an unscientific study while they were still using paper forms. They tracked how long it took new patients to fill out the forms. "On average," relates the dentist, "it took twenty to twenty-five minutes. If a patient's appointment was at 8:00am, by the time they finished the forms and got them turned in—and if there weren't any mistakes and certain parts didn't have to be redone—it was nearly 8:30 by the time they finished.

"Once we incorporated the paperless forms, we noticed that the time it took a new patient to fill out the forms dropped to eight minutes on average, and we've had new patients fill them out in as few as two minutes. We were shocked!"

Dr. Pace credits the user-friendliness of the paperless software with making people of all ages comfortable with the digital forms. "We've had young, tech-savvy parents fill them out; we've had grandparents fill them out," he relates. "They're not intimidated by the technology and the response has been great."

Another benefit of the paperless software is that it allows parents to fill out forms from their home computer or from anywhere they have Internet access. All the information is entered into the digital forms, and those forms are waiting for them on the tablet computer when they arrive at Dr. Pace's office and sign in. The parents simply review the forms for accuracy, make any necessary changes and sign them digitally.

### **X-RAYS**

Although most dental offices have not yet made the transition from paper forms to digital forms, many have taken an initial step toward digital technology by transitioning from film radiography to digital radiography.

"I think that's a key component of being a paperless office," says Dr. Pace, "because *paper* doesn't necessarily mean just paper documents; it also means x-ray film and the chemicals involved in developing that film. By going to digital x-rays, exposure times have gone way down so you're exposing the patient to less radiation and still being able to see what you need to see on the x-rays."

Dr. Pace says communicating with his patients' parents is made easier when he is able to show them a digital image on a high-resolution screen rather than holding x-ray film up to a viewbox. "Also," he says, "when reviewing medical history and other issues with parents, paperless technology allows me to type or write notes which are recorded and accessible at any time."

Digital technology also allows Dr. Pace to share a patient's x-rays with an orthodontist, oral surgeon, periodontist, general dentist or medical doctor. "We can email them directly and we can include photographs and notes, if necessary. From a management standpoint, it's much easier for the staff."

Sending and receiving x-rays by email has eliminated the delays that often arose when traditional x-rays were lost or damaged during delivery from one location to another. It has also eliminated delays resulting when parents forget to bring x-rays from another specialist's office. "We call the orthodontist's office or the oral surgeon's office and say, *Could you email them to us?*" relates Dr. Pace. "That process may take just a couple minutes, whereas with film it may have taken a week or two weeks. In that way, it ties into the paperless concept. I don't think you can be paperless and still be non-digital with the x-rays."

Despite transforming Tallahassee Pediatric Dentistry at Summit Ridge into a truly paperless practice, Dr. Pace stresses that doing so did not require him to undertake formal technical education. "I don't have a technology background," he notes, "and I'm not especially tech-savvy. The software has evolved to the point where a person with average technical knowledge can use the technology practically."

#### **OTHER LEADING-EDGE TOOLS**

The state-of-the-art technology in Dr. Pace's practice is not limited to digital x-rays and paperless forms; it also includes other leading-edge tools, such as plasma televisions. "Ten years ago, a plasma TV was something you'd see in a million-dollar home," states the dentist. "Now, these screens are much more affordable and take up much less space, so you can place multiple screens in an office setting."

"The generation that's been coming up is used to high-resolution monitors and video games. They make young patients feel comfortable, and they draw the kids' attention to certain things when you use distraction techniques. It's just a great aid in making them comfortable during their treatment, and I think pediatrics is all about having a casual, comfortable environment.

"The screens are also a beneficial tool in educating the parents. Since the screens don't take up a lot of space, you can use a large-size screen to display more information."

Dr. Pace's collection of innovative tools also includes a dental laser for hard and soft tissue, as well as a caries-detecting laser that helps identify cavities. "That's something that not a lot of dentists are using," states Dr. Pace, "but I love that technology and I think patients appreciate it as well."

Technological advancements have revolutionized Dr. Pace's dental practice, but he has not let those advancements overshadow his reason for implementing the technology in the first place: to better serve the infants, children and adolescents entrusted to him for their dental care. "I really enjoy working with kids," he says. "You have a child who's anxious or fearful, and then, after they've gotten their treatment completed, you see the confidence they exude and the smile on their face. It's really something very special. That's what attracted me to pediatrics. I realized that these were the patients I wanted to have."

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Tallahassee Pediatric Dentistry at Summit Ridge is located at 709 Inner Rd., Tallahassee, FL 37844. Call the office at (904) 555- 4008. To learn more about the practice, please visit [www.website.com](http://www.website.com).

**Franklin A. Pace, D.M.D.**, received his Doctor of Dental Medicine degree from the University of Florida College of Dentistry. He completed a two-year residency at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, where he received his specialty certificate in Pediatric Dentistry. Dr. Pace is board certified by the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry. He is a member of the Florida Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, American Dental Association, Dental Society of Greater Tallahassee, Florida Dental Association, and Northern Florida District Dental Association. Dr. Pace has been practicing pediatric dentistry since 1989.

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