The power of cross coding: How hygienists can support their patients’ overall body health

By Marianne Harper

Have you lost the excitement? Are you content with what you might now perceive as the same-old, same-old every day? Day after day you may be performing hygiene procedures over and over again, all the while knowing you are helping your patients but perhaps you simply don’t feel as though you are truly making a significant difference in their overall health. If you feel that level of frustration, or even if you don’t, but you are interested in advancing your career, then read on to discover some ways in which you can make a significant difference in the health of your patients.

As you are aware, dentistry is becoming recognized as a medical discipline. We in the dental field are in a unique position to support our patients’ overall body health. Our patients who maintain their dental health are less likely to suffer from other disease processes. The minimization of periodic plastic and explorers, and caries are bacterial infections that can be spread through the use of peri- odontal probes and explorers. First of all, periodontal diseases should be diagnosed by the periodontist. If periodontal infections are apparent, patients should be referred for care. In addition, hygienists need to be invaluable to the practice. As you can see, these tests cover many possible systemic conditions. Your practice will have to determine which staff members are allowed to perform these determinations. Because your state makes these determinations, your practice should become proactive by referring the patient back to his or her primary care provider.

However, because dentistry has evolved over the last decade, there are more ways that the dental practice can help make these determinations. With the frequency of patients’ visits and the availability of numerous cutting edge diagnostic tools, we have the unique opportunity to administer different types of disease testing that, in the past, were performed only by medical practices.

If you are unfamiliar with the types of medical testing that are available for dental practices to perform, then the following information can make a big difference in the quality of your practice’s treatment, and it may help to make a significant change in how you perceive your career.

First of all, periodontal diseases and caries are bacterial infections, but the majority of dental practices diagnose these conditions through the use of periodontal probes and explorers. Have you considered that medical practices would never begin treatment without determining if they are treating bacteria or a virus? In dentistry, we need to differentiate between aspirin sensitivity, blood dyscrasias, other diseases, fungus, yeast or a cyst; so bacteriologic tests should be performed. Microscopic tests, DNA tests, or bacterial tests should be performed if periodontal infections are apparent.

Tests that can be performed in a dental practice:
- ADA blood sugar
- C-reactive protein (CRP)
- HIV testing
- Screening for cardiovascular disease (e.g. HeartScore System)
- Saliva biomarker test – measures three specific biomarkers that play a role in cancer development in the oral cavity

As you can see, these tests cover many possible systemic conditions. Your practice will have to determine which staff members are allowed to administer these tests, because your state makes these determinations. Even if hygienists are not allowed per your state’s regulations regulations, your practice can include these tests in the practice to add these tests to the practice’s procedure mix. These tests cover many possible systemic conditions. Your practice will have to determine which staff members are allowed to administer these tests, because your state makes these determinations.
coding is a cutting edge insurance system whereby dental practices can file a patient's medically necessary dental procedures with their medical plans. Implementing cross coding creates greater class acceptance resulting in increased patient affordability and practice profitability. Hygienists can play a key role in the implementation of cross coding. Hygienists can be the communicators for cross coding in their practices by alerting the practice of patients whom they believe are medically compromised. Such patients are excellent candidates for cross-coded claims.

As an example, hygienists can inquire about conditions that might indicate that a patient has sleep apnea (Fig. 1). For those practices that treat sleep apnea, the practice would then need to refer the patient for a sleep study before commencing treatment. As an example, hygienists can spearhead the process. There are significant differences between dental and medical claims. The biggest difference is that, at present, medical insurance is diagnosis driven while dental insurance is not as of yet. Medical insurance uses diagnosis codes and six procedure codes. Codes within these code systems provide further diagnostic information or details on why a procedure might have been modified by a specific circumstance. As you can see, cross coding is not an easy system to implement. The answer to easing the difficulty with cross coding is to take a good course on the topic. You also can check out my website, www.artofpracticemanagement.com, to see the different tools available to help dental practices implement cross coding.

As mentioned already, the patient's benefit from cross coding is that medically necessary dental procedure can be made more affordable. It is possible to file the tests already mentioned with a patient's medical insurance plan. There are diagnosis and procedure codes that apply to these tests, but those are too involved for the scope of this article to provide all of the codes needed. There is no guarantee that these tests would be covered by the plan. According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "the existence of a code does not, of itself, determine coverage or noncoverage." It is certainly worth a phone call to determine coverage. I always advise practices that code cross coded procedures with their medical plans. Dental practices can file the tests already mentioned by the plan changes. However, the more that complaints are issued, the more likely that medical insurance carriers will begin to see the necessity for including these types of procedures in their plans.

The full scope of cross coding is much more extensive than just these tests. Dental practices should be cross coding for the following:

- Trauma procedures
- Oral surgical procedures
- TMJ procedures
- Sleep apnea procedures
- Medically necessary endodontic procedures
- Medically necessary implant and periodontal procedures
- Exams, radiographs and diagnostic procedures for any medically necessary dental procedure

Between implementing disease testing and cross coding, a hygienist will significantly make positive changes to his or her career. These hygienists will not only help patients obtain optimal health, but they can also help make procedures more affordable. Patients will be able to see their dental practice truly cares about their health, TMJ and other procedures.

References


About the Author

Marianne Harper is the CEO of The Art of Practice Management. Her areas of expertise include revenue and collection systems, business office systems and the training of dental/medical cross coding. Harper is a consultant, trainer, lecturer and author. Her published content is cross coding. "Your Practice Walking — A Guide Through the Cross Walk of Dental to Medical Coding" and her "CPT-Harper series on medical cross coding. She can be reached at mmharper@a.p.m.1@suddenlink.net.