

SUDDEN DEATH OR DISABILITY

ADVICE FROM EXPERIENCE: WHAT A PROFESSIONAL HEALTHCARE PRACTICE CAN DO

In a very recent example of a sudden tragedy, trusted friends within the dental industry were called upon for advice on what should be done.

A dentist passed away suddenly, and their team assumed that the right thing to do was to mail a letter to each patient announcing the passing of the dentist. You may be surprised to know that this approach is an invitation to patients to switch providers and erode the legacy the dentist built over the years. I have collated actions to follow in this situation that are based on my experience of having sadly dealt with, too many similar cases.



DON'Ts

What NOT to do:

1. Don't change the office voicemail message
2. Don't mail a letter
3. Don't make any posts on social media
4. Don't talk to dental suppliers and lab people
5. Don't feed the rumor and gossip mills that circle around tragic circumstances

What to do:

1. Close the practice for a few days to grieve and attend the funeral of the dearly departed
2. Write a simple script that all staff can trust and rely upon to maintain a composed message
3. Hire a Locum to attend the practice and secure employment
4. And then it is business as usual – as much as this seems calculating – it is crucial



DOs



Some patients may question how you can keep working when the doctor is suddenly gone. You will. For the staff, preserving employment, the legacy of the departed owner and the quality of care that he or she stood for is your top priority.

For the family and advisors, preserving the value of the practice and the family estate and honouring the years of work this dentist invested demands that the practice remains open at all costs.

A Locum is needed to attend to the patients and they can usually be found on very short notice in these circumstances. There is a network in every community to reach out to for help. Do NOT allow a young and ambitious dentist who says they may buy the practice to be the Locum. This is not the time to "hire the buyer" as there are far too many other factors at stake. Mature, experienced dentists who have no ownership ambition are the ideal Locum(s).

As appointments approach for patients who might not know of the passing of the owner, it is important to tell them there will be a different provider ready to greet them on their arrival, but that does not need to be done more than one or two days in advance, when the usual telephone call is made to remind the patient of their upcoming appointment. Telephone is definitely the best way to do this. Some practices have converted to email and text for patient reminders. That should be temporarily disabled at this critical time. Let's go back to the telephones and be respectful of people's emotions.

Some patients might have had a longstanding relationship with the doctor. They definitely deserve a phone call as soon as possible. The large majority of patients have a relationship with their doctor, but it might not be essential that they all be notified right away. Many people do not have an appointment for a considerable period of time and it is not necessary that they be telephoned at this juncture.

It is delicate. It is not easy. It is a time of high emotions, sadness, and shock in a very short space of time.

Preserving the value of the practice, the estate and honouring the integrity of the owner's legacy are the top priorities and all those involved should remain calm and seek the advice of seasoned representatives in this area. Know that every situation is unique and not all require the protocols or processes that I have mentioned, but obtaining guidance from experienced advisers will give you the confidence to know what to do.

If you are ever in doubt, the team at ROI Corporation are readily available to help you through this difficult time.

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