

Software “Evolution” Not “Revolution” for Peek Office Efficiency

I use a Kavo highspeed, a Midwest lowspeed, a Danville particle abrasion unit, an Adec dental unit and a Pelton Crane chair ... all from different manufactures yet they all work happily together. Now I am considering the purchase of an electric handpiece and it is reassuring to know that it will work with all of my existing equipment. I can have the “evolution” of better handpiece technology without the “revolution” of replacing all my other equipment! But until recently, this was not true with our computer systems; products from different manufacturers were not always compatible. Mercifully, times have now changed and we can take advantage of these changes as we improve the efficiency of our practices and the quality of our patient care.

No single dental software manufacture has all the best computer features. But we can now add additional software that works with our existing practice management software (PMS) to inexpensively provide us with the new features we need. In other words, we can keep our same dental chair (our PMS) and still add the new electric handpiece (perhaps digital x-ray) from a different company. The new software works with our existing PMS data without forcing us to make any drastic, expensive changes: evolution, not revolution. This article discusses some useful computer products that can be added to all the major PMS programs.

Digital X-Rays: Digital x-ray is increasing rapidly in dentistry. It lowers overhead, is faster, eases the burden on the environment, and can be far more diagnostic than conventional film. Good radiology software allows us to see things that were invisible on even the most sensitive, most accurately exposed and most meticulously processed film. (Figure 1) But there is a common misconception that our digital radiography software and our PMS must come from the same software company in order to be “integrated.” Not true! We can get the best solutions available from different vendors rather than a compromised, cobbled together conglomeration. Management software features and radiology software features have nothing in common so it is not surprising that the “best” product of each type would come from different companies. Now virtually any radiology software can be linked to virtually any PMS with the same level of practical integration. For example, XDR X-Ray (<http://www.xdr-radiology.com>; (888) 937-9729) (excellent radiology software, in my opinion) includes a free built-in “link” that allows it to fully integrate with all the major PMS programs. One mouse click is all that is required to



Figure 1: Rapid X-Ray Enhancement:

The x-ray on the top is typical of many digital radiographs; good resolution but poor contrast discrimination in the DEJ area. The image on the bottom has been manipulated with a single, easy, click of the Caries/Endo “Yoon Button” on the left menu to enhance the contrast in the DEJ area and clearly shows caries into the dentin on the distal of #29. XDR-Radiology’s “Yoon Buttons” allow a busy dentist to quickly enhance images to make areas of interest more clearly visible. (www.XDR-Radiology.com)

move from management to radiology or back again! This compatibility of products from different companies is beneficial because the x-ray software is much important than the x-ray sensor. Let me repeat this underappreciated concept: x-ray software is more important than x-ray sensors! And the capability of software varies tremendously among various manufacturers.

Prevent Failed Appointments: In my seminars, one of the most frequently cited problems are failed appointments. Offices use postcards, letters, telephone calls and even “free gifts” to try to get patients to show up for the appointments they made. These “solutions” are almost as expensive as the problem itself! There are now some inexpensive, effective solutions that are entirely automatic, taking none of staffs’ time. These are the “email notification” services such as Uappoint (www.Uappoint.com; (888) 822-2778), DemandForce (www.demandforce.com; (800) 246-9853) and Housecalls (www.televox.com; (800) 644-4266). Each of these services uses our PMS data and extracts the information needed to send email appointment confirmations and recare reminders. They also let a patient click on an icon to send an email back to the office saying “I will be there.” (Almost 70% of people now use email. If you don’t have an office email system already in place, we need to get one pronto! The cost of both the emails and website hosting can be less than \$5 a month. [<http://www.1and1.com>])

Email confirmation services cost about \$200 per month and each offer a slightly different combination of features. They all send reminders 2 weeks and 2 days before a scheduled appointment as well as sending recare reminders. But Uappoint works in almost “real time” by sending each patient a confirmation 30 minutes after the appointment is made and automatically updating confirmations on an internet-based appointment screen. DemandForce allows patients to refer their friends to the office “on-line,” allows the “broadcast” of email newsletters, season greetings, or special promotions, and automatically tracks the response for these. Housecalls sends emails but also sends “text messages” to patients’ cell phones. Each of these services requires staff to collect patient email addresses but is far easier than making telephone confirmation calls! It is a good illustration of how computers are “force multipliers:” staff enters

the email address into the computer only once but the computer uses it many times, automatically confirming each appointment the patient makes.



Figure 2 Computerized Treatment Notes Without Typing:
Easy Notes Pro (www.EasyNotesPro.com) allows you to enter your treatment notes by just tapping the computer screen with a stylus – no typing necessary! Fast, easy, fully customized, correctly spelled ... and legible!

Paperless Charting *Without* Typing: Having all our treatment notes in computer system is not only the most secure place for them but is also the easiest, least expensive, most legible, and most accessible way to store the information. No more searching for a paper chart or trying to decipher handwriting. And while an assistant is looking at the progress notes on one computer, a front office person can be documenting an insurance claim for the same patient, at the same time, from another computer. Try that with a paper chart! So how come everyone isn’t already doing it this way? The biggest obstacle is that no one wants to type all those notes! Too hard and too time consuming. The good news is that there is now an inexpensive

program, developed by a dentist, which allows us to enter as many notes as we wish, customized for each patient, with only the tap of a stylus on a computer screen ... even a computer screen that fits in a shirt pocket! (Figure 2) The program is Easy Notes Pro (www.EasyNotesPro.com; fax: (919) 870-5228) and it will work with any Windows-based PMS program. After each tap of the stylus, our notes are entered directly into the PMS or into any other program we wish. Detailed, accurate, fully customized, fast, legible, correctly spelled progress notes with no typing! Its time for hand-written notes to go in the dental museum!

Unalterable, Encrypted, Legal Paperless Records: OK, so we now have our treatment notes in the computer but how about our medical histories, consent forms, financial arrangements, treatment acceptance forms ... all the miscellaneous forms we want patients to sign but had difficulty legally storing in our computers? More good news! DentForms (www.MedicTalk.com; (877) 270-8255), works with all major PMS programs and lets a patient, staff or dentist fill out and electronically sign a form on a computer. It then encrypts and permanently retains it in an unalterable format acceptable in court. The patient uses an “e-pad” or tablet computer to sign the form and it is stored on the office file server (where it will be backed up automatically) and is immediately accessible from any other computer in the office. (Figure 3) Other forms such as a consent or a treatment acceptance, can be generated by a staff person then electronically signed by the patient, printed if desired, and again permanently and unalterably stored on the office file server. DentForms is a faster, easier, better, more reliable and legally secure way to handle and store all our office forms!

While Easy Notes Pro was intended to do charting without typing and DentForms was intended to securely store our forms, the two can be combined with any major PMS program to allow the secure, encrypted, legally accepted means to store our records. Some PMS programs already have the secure stor-

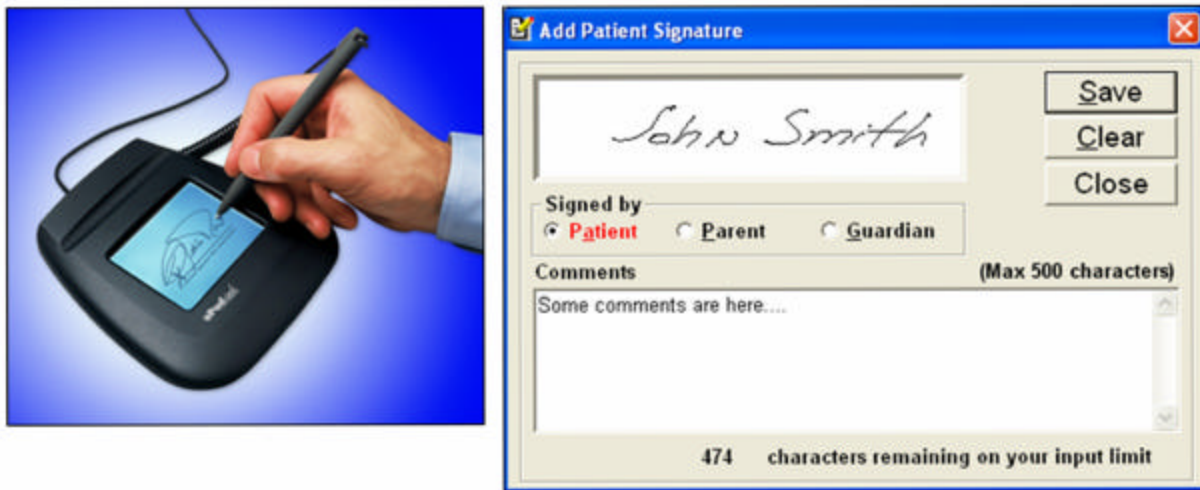


Figure 3 Electronic, secure signatures:

A Patient, staff or dentist can legally sign any form or chart notes using either an “E-Pad” or on the screen of a Tablet PC computer. The signature is then encrypted and stored unalterably on the office file server by the DentForm software (www.medictalk.com)

age feature but many do not. This combination of programs, working with our existing PMS program, allows us to expand the capabilities and efficiencies of a computer system without switching to a new PMS or spending a lot of money. Evolution, not revolution.

Electronic Insurance Claims: Most dentists have discovered the benefits of electronically submitted insurance claims (eclaims) but many dentists still pay a premium charge of 50 cents or more for each claim. At least one eclaims company, DentalxChange, (www.dentalxchange.com; 800.576.6412) offers eclaims at a substantially reduced rate with a low price guarantee while still providing some “extras” such as immediate on-line patient eligibility from many different insurance companies. Using Dentalx-Change, some insurance plans will return a pre-estimation in just a few minutes and a finalized EOB overnight. They also now offer enhanced credit card processing (www.payconnect.net) at extremely competitive rates. Just as with radiology software, we can shop for the best eclaims company without changing our PMS. In our office DentalxChange saves us about \$600 per year (enough to buy two new computers!) and provides additional free services that were not available from our PMS eclaims service.

Dental Insurance Information: Another valuable dental insurance resource is provided by Trojan Dental Service (www.trojanonline.com; (800) 451-9723). Although it is not available in all areas of the country, it does work with all the major PMS programs to provide extensive information about our patients’ dental benefits. If Trojan does not have a particular patient’s benefits already “online,” we can simply call them and they will get it for us! In spite of the increasing trend towards web-based insurance information from the insurance companies themselves, we have found the ease and detail provided by Trojan Dental Services to be invaluable.

This article has illustrated how we can now “evolve” our offices by adding the best, most efficient and most cost-effective new computer features without the unnecessary “revolution,” time and expense of changing our PMS program. Adding digital x-ray, email confirmation service, no-typing computerized treatment notes, legal medical history forms, a less-expensive eclaims provider or a dental insurance information service is now no harder than adding a new handpiece to our operatory. We can pick the best product for our office, add it to our existing PMS software, and take the time to fully integrate it into our office routines before we add the next computer product. Such a “evolutionary” approach provides better quality, is less expensive, and doesn’t overwhelm our staff with training. Easier, simpler, less expensive and better ways to run our practice ... that’s what dental computing is all about!

Bruce A. Stephenson, DDS, FAGD, practices in a Paperless and Wireless restorative dental practice in San Leandro, CA. He has no financial interest in any of the products mentioned in this article. Dr. Stephenson has been lecturing, writing, and consulting on dental computing since 1985. For information about his computer consulting services, you can call 510-483-2164