

Clear Aligners

in General Dentistry

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CLEAR BLUE SMILES®

INTRODUCTION

The American public visits general dentists more than any other health care professional. Routine annual hygiene appointments represent a unique opportunity to provide proper oversight of dental conditions and to offer patients the services they need to support oral health. Since so many adult patients experience an increase in malocclusion over time and may develop signs and symptoms of occlusal disease, the opportunities for dentists are almost endless.

With patient access through their general dentist and increased public interest in clear aligner treatment, there is tremendous growth potential for dentists who provide this service. However, many patients are unsure whether treatment should be delivered in an orthodontic office or through their general dentist.

Clear aligner treatments in orthodontic practices make up approximately 10–15% of orthodontic services. Despite aligners being widely available for the past 20 years, orthodontists remain primarily in the business of providing traditional wire-and-bracket treatment for adolescent patients. The adults they treat are usually those who actively seek orthodontists to straighten their teeth for cosmetic rather than functional reasons.

The average general dental practice in the U.S. provides clear aligner therapy in less than 10–15% of cases. With the resources available today, patients seeking orthodontists instead of their own general dentist for aligners reflects a missed opportunity by the dental community to meet patient needs. General dentists are uniquely positioned to identify candidates for clear aligners because their patients come through hygiene twice a year, year after year. The trust and relationships built over time with the doctor and team create a strong foundation for building a clear aligner service within the practice.

Most patients prefer to have dental services delivered in their general dentist's office rather than being referred to unfamiliar specialists. Yet general dentists too often relinquish this advantage. Instead of opening the door to conversations about the patient's condition and introducing aligners as a solution, they allow the trust they have built over years to go unused.

CLINICAL APPLICATION

If you've been practicing dentistry for even a short time, you've probably come across your share of deep bites, narrow arches, lingually inclined posteriors, and crowded anterior teeth. You've also likely observed anterior incisal edge thinning and wear, along with posterior occlusal table reduction and subsequent loss of vertical dimension.

Attrition, loss of tooth structure, changes in periodontal soft tissue integrity, increased occurrence of abfractions, and even dental work failing at a higher frequency are all observations familiar to general dentists.



Commonly observed manifestation of occlusal disease during routine re-care examination



Destructive malocclusion observed in a 19-year-old female

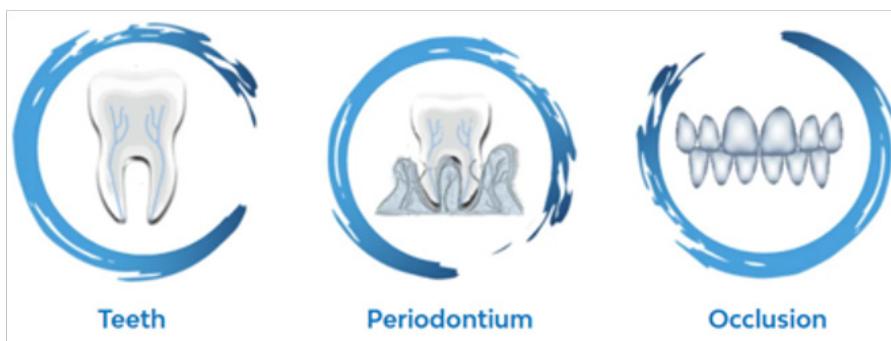
When teeth are colliding rather than gliding in harmony, these observed signs can be described as destructive malocclusion. This is a clinical term essentially describing a symptom of premature aging of the oral cavity. Dentists see occlusal disease and abnormalities every day in practice.

For many, observing such a decline in their patients' oral condition can be extremely frustrating, especially when measures are not being taken to address the situation.

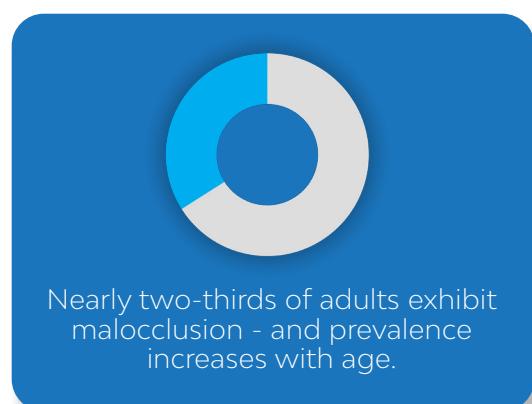
THE OCCLUSAL DILEMMA

In clinical practice, dentists tend to focus primarily on the diagnosis and treatment of dental caries and periodontal disease. Despite their best efforts to control these two major pathologies, dentists frequently observe continued breakdown of the oral condition over time.

Occlusion as a dental discipline often falls short of receiving the attention it deserves within our profession. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers malocclusion one of the most important oral health problems, following caries and periodontal disease. The prevalence of occlusal disease and its adverse impact on our patients' oral health is an underemphasized clinical concern.



Often, an undiagnosed and unresolved occlusal imbalance becomes progressively worse, with signs and symptoms of occlusal disease becoming evident. Dentists strive to preserve a healthy masticatory system and anticipate the long-term implications of oral pathologies through preventive measures.



Achieving enhanced dental form is also an important part of the overall aesthetic quality of an individual's facial appearance. It is generally accepted that more than half of the adult population is unsatisfied with their smile. Functional and aesthetic goals can be difficult to achieve in the presence of the slow but steady progression of occlusal disease.

Better oral health care can be provided if routine identification and assessment of occlusion were utilized more frequently. Clear aligner therapy can be used to rebalance the occlusal scheme, neutralize the destructive nature of occlusal disease, and harmonize the masticatory system.

There is also a lesser known but critically important connection between tooth alignment and sleep apnea that deserves attention. Crowded teeth can push the tongue posteriorly, narrowing the airway. Midline collapse of mandibular teeth can cause both arches to collapse, further reducing tongue space. Long-term misalignment can alter facial muscle development and function, potentially impacting breathing patterns. These relationships may be affecting your patients' health in ways not often considered.

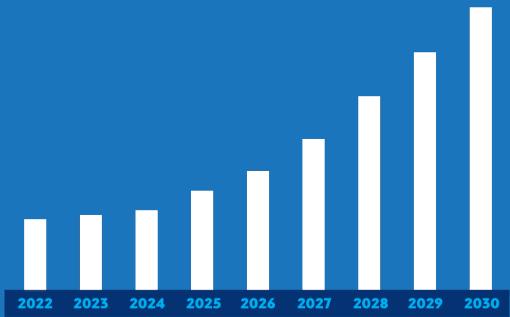
Clear aligners can be used to address these concerns. It is estimated that **80% of patients** can be effectively treated without traditional orthodontic methods such as brackets and wires. Arch expansion and uprighting misaligned teeth within a collapsed arch produce relative extrusion, a process that achieves the overall effect of extrusion and increased vertical dimension of occlusion without actually extruding teeth. Reversing arch collapse caused by continued movement and misalignment provides a better environment for proper dental function, improved breathing, and overall oral health, representing a more holistic approach.

CLEAR ALIGNER MARKET

The global clear aligner market is experiencing significant and sustained growth, with experts projecting significant expansion over the coming decade. Most of this projected growth will occur in the general dental space.

Several factors are driving this growth, including increased consumer awareness, the health and longevity movement among the aging population, and a rising prevalence of malocclusion due to greater tooth retention with age. Technological advancements in aligner software and materials are also playing a crucial role - reducing treatment time, improving patient comfort, and offering programs designed to help dentists integrate aligners into their practices.

The global clear aligners market size was valued at USD 2.2 Billion in 2018 and is projected to reach USD 8.2 Billion by 2026 - exhibiting a 17.7% yearly growth forecast!



For general dentists, the clear aligner market represents a tremendous opportunity not only to help patients achieve a healthier, more harmonious oral condition, but also to strengthen practice economics. Six million people seek orthodontic treatment annually, and clear aligner usage is expected to experience triple-digit growth over the next 5-10 years. With an increasing adult population, demand for comfortable and aesthetic orthodontic options will only continue to rise.

Integrating clear aligner therapy into a general practice can organically grow revenues and enhance the bottom line without requiring large investments in external marketing. Yet it is estimated that only 15% of general dentists consistently offer invisible orthodontic aligner treatment for their patients.

NORMAL VS. IDEAL

Edward Angle, the father of modern orthodontics, defined malocclusion as a deviation from **ideal occlusion** based on the relationships of the upper and lower first molars and canines. Any deviation in anterior-posterior or buccal-lingual tooth position was considered malocclusion because it was "non-ideal," even if the patient functioned perfectly well without symptoms.

Orthodontists, of course, strive to achieve Angle's ideal orthodontic condition for their patients, the majority of whom may have malocclusion but have not yet begun to show signs or symptoms of occlusal disease.

Dr. Robert Strang, a student of Angle and author of more than 100 publications including *A Textbook of Orthodontia*, developed his own definition. Strang's perspective is often more relevant to the treatment objectives general dentists pursue with adult patients. He accepted as normal much of what we were taught to label as malocclusion - provided it was aesthetically and functionally acceptable, did not break down teeth, bone, or soft tissues, and allowed for proper breathing. He determined teeth to be in harmonious occlusion if they remained in a stable state of solid functionality, which is the goal of restorative outcomes in general practice.

For the general dental office, Strang's definition of normal helps us identify malocclusion that is - or can become - occlusal disease. Once we recognize the signs, our treatment objectives should be to normalize the patient's alignment and occlusal scheme into a balanced, comfortable, and stable state over time, both day and night, without added effort or strain. Being able to breathe unabated falls within the parameters of the treatment outcomes we seek as well.

Therefore, having a fundamental understanding of what constitutes normal, healthy, and stable occlusion allows the general dentist to properly identify when patients are deviating and breaking down.

A MODERN APPROACH TO RESOLVING MALOCCLUSION

What if, as a clinician, you had the opportunity to offer patients a solution that not only mitigates but neutralizes the degradation from malocclusion we so often observe but feel helpless to resolve? What if you could provide a treatment alternative that is non-invasive, relatively cost-effective, and enhances aesthetic outcomes along the way? Resolving tooth crowding and dental arch collapse without the discomfort, inconvenience, and unsightly appearance of traditional braces is not only possible today but is being done routinely in dental practices around the world.

Clear aligner therapy represents a modern approach to treating the signs and symptoms of malocclusion. There is no need for incredibly expensive and invasive full-mouth rehabilitative treatment. No bulkier, uncomfortable nightguard appliances that fail to halt the progression of daytime tooth movement and opposing arch collapse.

Treatment time with clear aligners can be considerably shorter compared to wire-and-bracket orthodontics. During treatment, patients experience less discomfort, while plaque removal and overall oral maintenance are substantially easier. Clear aligners can be used to rebalance the occlusal scheme, neutralize destructive forces, and harmonize the masticatory system. The best aligner software is designed to provide adequate mechanical and functional forces for efficient treatment, along with retention protocols to help prevent relapse and maintain harmonious occlusion. With clear aligner therapy, we conquer malocclusion by leveling, aligning, and expanding the arches through tipping and uprighting teeth that have undergone physiologic drift over many years.

Selective IPR may be used in some cases to create space instead of extracting or distalizing teeth, as is often required in traditional orthodontics. When a collapsed posterior occlusal scheme is corrected to restore proper function, abfraction development and posterior cusp wear can be mitigated. The risk of incisal edge attrition and stress crack formation is reduced when teeth are properly aligned. Straighter teeth also provide an environment that allows for easier plaque removal, reducing caries risk and gingival inflammation, particularly in cases with anterior crowding and rotations.

The general dentist offering clear aligners provides a less invasive, more aesthetically pleasing alternative to costly reconstructive dentistry for correcting malocclusion. By incorporating this service, dentists not only meet the growing demand for discreet orthodontic solutions but also prioritize the patients' long-term health.



Before clear aligner therapy showing arch collapse and subsequent loss of vertical dimension of occlusion



Post clear aligner correction of misalignment and increased vertical dimension of occlusion

Depending on the severity of the condition, many adult patients can resolve a lifetime of tooth migration within 6-10 months of clear aligner therapy, achieving straight, healthy teeth and normalized arch size, form, and function. Patients can maintain a stable, aesthetically enhanced dental condition that can be preserved for a lifetime with proper nighttime retainer wear.

CLEAR ALIGNER OPPORTUNITY



Integrating clear aligners into the general dental practice remains the greatest challenge. The typical orthodontic specialist develops an entire practice ecosystem exclusively dedicated to orthodontic treatment, complete with clinical workflows, business systems, marketing, insurance, and financial processes. General dental practices, however, often lack the pieces needed to make the machine of clear aligner dentistry function smoothly.

For those considering offering clear aligners - or for those already providing the service but experiencing low case volumes - this represents the most significant opportunity since the advent of routine hygiene soft tissue periodontal therapy.

If you currently offer clear aligners, you've already taken an important step toward providing comprehensive oral health for your patients while helping your practice achieve greater economic success. Unfortunately, inadequate implementation often results in weak case volumes. **Across the country, general dentists average only 1.7 clear aligner case starts per month**, a number that has remained static for years.

Given how frequently clinicians encounter the signs and symptoms of occlusal dysfunction in their adult patients, this extremely low case rate represents lost opportunities for improving patient health and increasing practice revenue.

EXPERT GUIDANCE

One of the most commonly cited reasons general dentists do not offer invisible aligner treatment is the belief that they lack sufficient clinical knowledge of orthodontics. Many dentists lack confidence in the diagnostic process or in managing the digital setup needed to achieve proper tooth alignment and occlusal schemes for successful outcomes. Unfortunately, this often prevents them from even discussing straightening options with patients. They either avoid assessing the condition and skip the conversation about aligners, or they fall back on the tried-and-true occlusal guard, placing a band-aid on a situation.

Others refer patients to orthodontic specialists for aligner therapy, missing the opportunity to provide the service in their own practice, which is something most patients prefer due to the trust and relationship they establish with their dentist.

Guidance from an orthodontic expert can play a crucial role in integrating aligners into a general dental practice. Aligner setup software and the technicians who manage it provide a strong starting point once records are obtained. However, patient expectations for high-level results, combined with the unique clinical challenges of adult malocclusions, mean additional steps are needed to manage cases properly.

The extensive damage caused by occlusal disease - attrition, missing teeth, restorations, and periodontal changes - requires that initial setups account for these complexities. The frequent need for additive measures after case completion must also be considered from the outset. Input, guidance, and collaboration with an orthodontic specialist who understands adult malocclusion dynamics provide invaluable support. This builds the general dentist's confidence and, in turn, increases case selection and case volumes.

CLEAR ALIGNERS AS A ROUTINE SERVICE

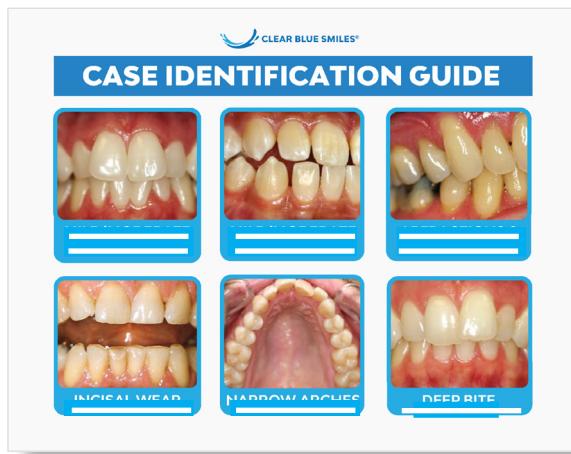
Distinct differences exist between clear aligners as a functional treatment modality in general dental practice and most other services dentists provide. In a general practice, patients seldom arrive specifically seeking orthodontics. Instead, they come twice a year to have their teeth cleaned and to check for decay. Periodontal status is assessed with probing and x-rays, caries is identified, and findings are explained with x-rays and intraoral cameras, tools that help patients visualize conditions in their mouths.

Adult patients may proactively ask about seeing an orthodontic specialist for tooth alignment correction, which they often perceive as a cosmetic issue. Uncovering occlusal-related problems to facilitate a discussion about aligners as a therapeutic option presents a much greater challenge for general dentists. As a result, general dentists run into various obstacles when attempting to incorporate aligners among their other services.

Orthodontists typically receive cases from external referrals and do not have a built-in patient base that regularly comes in for comprehensive diagnostic evaluation. General dentists do have this inherent resource, but they must proactively create the orthodontic market within their existing patient population. Success requires that dentists and their teams work together to identify opportunities and present clear aligner therapy as a pathway to total oral health.

A **clear aligner practice integration program** provides the practice with a system that the doctor and team can rely on to consistently generate aligner leads through a process that works on an ongoing basis. This allows more patients to experience the benefits of clear aligner therapy and better oral health.

When dentists and teams approach patients about aligners solely from an aesthetic perspective during routine hygiene exams, they quickly become discouraged by the lack of interest most patients show in cosmetic enhancement. Integration is much more effective when the doctor and clinical team increase patient awareness of occlusion from a functional standpoint. Even well-intended dentists who focus only on aesthetics often face resistance, which can discourage the entire team.



Having a malocclusion identification process gives the clinician a functional oral health rationale for aligner therapy – one that patients can visualize, evaluate, and seriously consider.

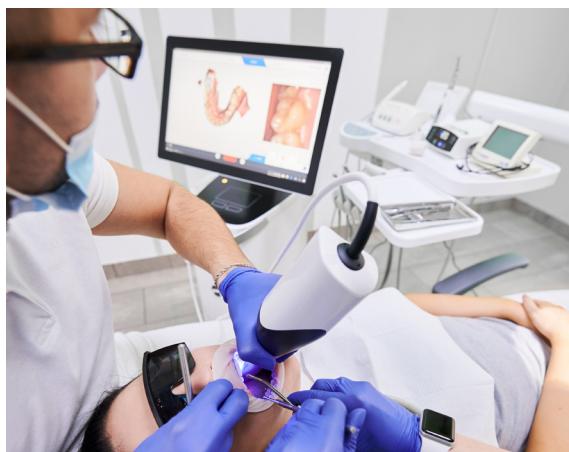
By contrast, a discretionary cosmetic approach often falls short of our clinical goals for optimal oral health. For this to be effective, the team should have access to specific tools that make orthodontic opportunities easy to recognize.

The absence of a diagnostic system for evaluating and documenting occlusal disease has been one of the greatest barriers to consistency in treatment. To not only identify signs of occlusal disease but also recognize which situations aligners can effectively address is an essential part of successful practice implementation.

HYGIENIST ENGAGEMENT

Hygienists spend considerably more time with patients during routine visits than the doctor. Over the years that patients come to the office, hygienists often become a trusted source of information about oral health and treatment opportunities. Their support can make the difference between a patient moving forward with the doctor's treatment recommendations or hesitating and delaying needed care.

Hygienists can leverage their patient relationships to open the door for meaningful discussions about dental problems and potential solutions, even before the doctor enters the room. They also play a key role in preparing patients for the exam by sharing their own malocclusion-related findings. In doing so, an effective hygienist becomes the doctor's partner in helping patients achieve optimal oral health.



"Applying the principals I learned were easier and faster than I expected. I love being able to effectively help my patients be as healthy as possible."

- Chris H., Dental Hygienist

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES

Once the doctor has completed the examination and the hygiene visit is finished, the patient ends their appointment at the front desk. Regardless of how effectively the doctor communicates the need for clear aligner treatment, whether the patient moves forward often depends on how well the administrative team reinforces those recommendations. For this reason, the front desk team plays a vital role in achieving case acceptance and, ultimately, case volume in the practice.

Even when patients have had a treatment modality introduced by the hygienist and then thoroughly discussed with the doctor, it is common for them to arrive at the front desk with additional clinical questions. In the case of clear aligners, it is essential that the business office team be trained, at minimum, in the fundamentals of the positive impact aligners can have on a patient's oral health and appearance.

ORTHODONTIC ASSESSMENT			
Patient Name:	Treatment Start Date:		
Patient DOB:	Estimated Treatment Time:		
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Equipping your administrative team with forms and guides can standardize the process and maximize clear aligner case acceptance.

The admin team must also understand all aspects of scheduling related to the series of appointments and be able to explain what happens at each step. They should know how to verify available orthodontic benefits and understand the key differences between orthodontic claim submissions and insurance company payment cycles, which vary from one company to another. Given the higher financial commitment for clear aligners, the front desk team must also have the right tools, such as a range of payment options, to make treatment more feasible for patients.

PATIENT PRESENTATION

Communicating the problems associated with occlusal disease and the treatment needed to address them can feel intimidating for both the doctor and the team when clear aligners are first introduced as a service. General dentists already manage a complex array of clinical issues throughout the day, leaving limited time and attention for these conversations. Patients, meanwhile, often arrive with their own preconceived (and often incorrect) notions about their oral condition and dentistry in general.

How often have we heard patients say that unless something in their mouth hurts, they believe there is no problem? For clinicians, the challenge of closing this understanding gap can feel daunting. Yet at the core, a dentist's ability to help patients is only as effective as their ability to communicate meaningfully and productively. Until a patient first understands that problems exist in their mouth, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to find the motivation to accept treatment.

Unless a patient clearly understands why they should consider straightening their teeth, they will often resist moving forward with clear aligner therapy. Well-designed visual aids that provide third-party reinforcement of the dentist's explanation can help bridge this gap and improve patient understanding.

TEAM EDUCATION & SUPPORT

Once the decision has been made to onboard clear aligner therapy into the practice, it is essential that all the necessary components are readily available. Integrating and developing any new service becomes much simpler for the doctor and team when clear, easy-to-understand learning materials are provided to support the initiative.

It is important that both the doctor and team have access to educational resources that can be accessed virtually, with clearly defined expectations for completing training in a timely manner. A robust clear aligner program should also provide ongoing support mechanisms and systems that serve as a reliable backdrop for nearly every clinical and business office situation that may arise as the practice progresses through the learning process.

High-performing practices aren't built on one-and-done onboarding. Especially when working with third-party companies or business support, look for organizations that train your clinical and administrative employees and offer material that is tailored to your practice. The result of a truly comprehensive training system will be a confident and successful team.

MARKETING & PROMOTION

External marketing of dental services can yield a return on investment for some practices. However, dentists today are less dependent on external new patient initiatives than ever before. With a net decrease in the supply of clinicians and increasing demand for dental services, general dentists are experiencing unprecedented levels of patient demand. This reduces the need to spend valuable resources on attracting new patients.

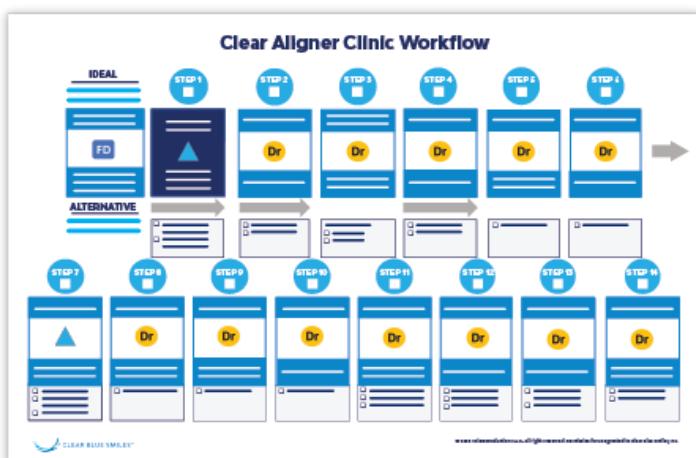
For many practices, the most valuable and cost-effective resource for generating revenue is their existing patient base. Major opportunities exist to promote new and highly valuable services to current patients, provided the dentist is open to the prospect. As with any new service, though, increasing patient awareness to spark meaningful clinical discussions does not happen magically.



Success depends on how well the practice adopts a structured clear aligner implementation program and delivers targeted messages that motivate patients to accept treatment for improved oral health. Truly effective marketing messages should be synchronized across multiple channels that reach patients in different ways while delivering the same theme in a coordinated manner. This includes print, the practice website, and other promotional tools that add together to achieve the desired effect.

CLINICAL WORKFLOW MANAGEMENT

Once the patient says yes to clear aligner therapy, the dental assistant takes on the most crucial role in facilitating the clinical process, as they oversee the majority of the clear aligner workflow. It is difficult to imagine a fully integrated aligner program without the dental assistant taking ownership and managing these processes properly. From initial records to case submission, to placement of the final retainers and every step in between, the role of the dental assistant cannot be overstated.



By taking on chairside responsibilities with the help of a clearly defined workflow, the assistant plays an essential part in leveraging and reducing the doctor's valuable chair time.

Clear aligner workflows differ significantly from any other service provided in the general dental office. Successful implementation requires a clear understanding of each process along the way. Knowing how much time is allotted for each procedure, proper armamentarium setup, and protocols for each appointment are all crucial. Managing records, tray systems, physical lab case handling, progress note protocols, and patient procedure sequencing are just some of the duties the dental assistant must manage.

SUMMARY

Now more than ever, today's busy general dentist needs organized systems, workflows, and protocols for onboarding a clear aligner service so that seamless integration is possible. Maximizing doctor chair time and leveraging the forces of a total team approach helps promote a more efficient operational process. Enhanced diagnosis and improved quality of patient care should always be at the forefront of our evolution as dental clinicians. Straighter teeth, a stable occlusion, and a harmonious balance of the masticatory system can all decrease the risk of developing signs and symptoms of occlusal disease.

For the patient, the net result includes a healthier masticatory system, improved overall oral health, and a stronger sense of self-image and confidence in a variety of social environments. When dentists and their teams become more aware of the potential to neutralize malocclusion through clear aligner therapy, their perspective on the practice shifts for the better.

In everyday clinical practice, dentists must be able to readily identify and assess conditions in their existing patient population that can benefit from aligner therapy. Systems for meaningful engagement and effective case presentation are important tools to help patients understand their potential for achieving optimal oral health. When you can tell a patient that, for less cost and in less than half the time of traditional braces, they can have their bite rebalanced to stop the destructive forces of malocclusion while achieving a beautiful smile, patients get excited about that possibility!

Once identification and discussion of occlusal anomalies become routine in the practice, corrective measures follow naturally. The dental team feels more motivated as patients receive the comprehensive treatment they deserve, while the practice generates increased revenue and enjoys stronger business results.

Clear aligner treatment can be transformational for your patients and for your practice. Helping patients achieve ideal oral health while improving their appearance and well-being for a lifetime is both deeply rewarding and a tremendous practice builder.

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SUPERCHARGE YOUR CLEAR ALIGNER BUSINESS

The potential to build a thriving clear aligner program is already sitting within your existing patient base. Clear Blue Smiles gives you everything you need to unlock that potential. Our comprehensive integration system is designed to bring your practice to new levels of success while helping patients achieve their healthiest smiles and most complete oral health.

Our turn-key practice integration system includes:

- ✓ Live onboarding & practice integration - guided support to get you up and running quickly
- ✓ Case reviews with orthodontic experts - confidence and clarity for even the most complex cases
- ✓ Clear aligner starter kit - tools and resources to launch your aligner program immediately
- ✓ Ongoing access to Blue Academy - on-demand (and CE-certified) training for your entire team

Transform your clear aligner business into a powerful engine for patient care and practice growth.

See how we can help at
clearbluesmiles.com





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