



Provocative attire

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Dear Dianne,

My daughter-in-law works at my front desk. She performs her job well, but I am concerned about how she dresses. Sometimes, she wears tight-fitting tops that are very low-cut. Her provocative attire seems inappropriate to me, but then I consider that maybe this is the fashion today. The fact that she is married to my son makes it difficult for me to speak to her about this problem. Do you know of a way to approach this issue without hurting her feelings or causing problems in our family? **Embarrassed Doctor**

Dear Embarrassed,

For the most part, patients cannot judge the technical aspects of the dentistry provided in your practice. So, they form perceptions based on things that are readily observable, such as your office décor and how you and your staff members present themselves. The way you and your staff members dress is a reflection of the quality of your practice.

Every business owner has the right to set standards of behavior and attire for their employees. When standards are not spelled out clearly, employees often set their own standards, which may or may not be appropriate. This is why you need a well-written policies and procedures manual for your practice. Your manual should contain a section devoted to standards of attire.

The problem you have presented is pervasive, and some doctors feel embarrassed to address the issue for fear of being accused of sexual harassment. Pop icons and movie stars have a profound effect on the younger generation in particular. Unfortunately, many young people today have never been mentored in professionalism.

Let me state unequivocally that attire of the health-care provider and staff member is important to people across all lines of population and geography. In an article published in June 2003, in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, Dr. Lawrence Brandt revealed the results of a survey of hundreds of people about their attitudes on the attire of health-care professionals.

Dr. Brandt wrote that a professional look inspires trust and projects competence. Harry Wong, Ed.D, noted edu-

cational speaker and author, wrote, “As you are dressed, so shall you be perceived, and as you are perceived, so shall you be treated.”

If we are honest, we will admit that most people do not enjoy going to their dental appointments. With that in mind, we need to go above and beyond to create a warm, congenial, and comfortable atmosphere where patients leave with good memories. An immodestly dressed business assistant can provoke feelings of disgust and embarrassment among some patients. Patients might question why you would permit such attire. Anything in your practice that embarrasses you is sure to embarrass some of your patients as well.

The fact that the staff member is a family member should not deter you from requiring the same standards of her as you do all other staff members. If you refuse to address any work-related problem with her simply because she is your daughter-in-law, your other staff members will feel resentful. My motto is this: Never hire anyone you cannot fire. Again, the policies and procedures manual should be your standard. All staff members should be required to read it and sign a form that says they agree to follow the guidelines. After establishing a policy regarding attire, nonconformity to your standards would reflect negatively at the staff performance review.

Patient perception is a large part of the overall profitability and success of any dental practice. Understanding this, you should not allow anything to diminish the feeling of professionalism you wish to project. If you need help developing a customized policies and procedures manual, contact me for assistance. **DE**

Dianne Glasscoe Watterson, MBA, assists dental practices in achieving their highest potential through practical, effective, on-site consulting. Call (301) 874-5240 to discuss how your practice management challenges can be solved. Visit Dianne's Web site at www.professionaldentalmgmt.com or e-mail her at dglasscoe@northstate.net.

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