

Protect Your Practice

Disaster Recovery Planning in Dental Practices: A Proactive Approach

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In today's dental environment, practices depend heavily on uninterrupted operations. While clinical care often receives the most attention, the systems that support it are just as critical. Disasters—whether natural, technological, or otherwise—can abruptly halt operations, compromise patient care, and threaten business viability. Disaster recovery planning (DRP) focuses on preparing in advance to restore operations quickly and safely, as opposed to reacting to an event.

Understanding the Risk Landscape

Effective planning begins with a risk assessment tailored to the practice. Common risks include natural disasters (such as floods, hurricanes, or earthquakes), cyber threats (ransomware, data breaches, phishing), infrastructure failures (power outages, server crashes), and human factors (theft, accidental data loss, or employee error). Understanding both the likelihood and potential impact of these risks helps an organization prioritize planning efforts. Geographic location, practice size, and reliance on technology all influence which threats deserve the greatest attention.

Plan Objectives and Scope

Clear objectives guide disaster recovery planning. Consider aligning objectives with broader business continuity goals. Key

objectives often include minimizing, protecting data, maintaining patient safety and communication, and meeting regulatory requirements such as HIPAA compliance. Consider developing the scope of the plan such that all critical assets are identified, including patient records, scheduling and billing systems, communication tools, physical facilities, clinical equipment, and staff roles. Clearly defining what is included reduces confusion during an actual disruption.

Assigning Roles and Responsibilities

Disaster recovery planning requires a team-based approach. Typically, this includes the practice owner or manager, IT support or consultants, clinical staff representatives, and administrative personnel. Consider defined responsibilities and decision-making authority for each role, along with designated backups. Clear role assignments improve coordination and reduce delays during high-stress situations.

Data Backup and Resilience

Data protection is central to any DRP. Consider planning for secure, reliable backups using on-site, cloud-based, or hybrid solutions. Backups that include regular testing ensure data can be restored when needed. Mapping where data is stored and how it can be recovered helps streamline response efforts during an outage.

Facility and Infrastructure Considerations

Physical preparedness is as important as digital resilience. Practices will want to consider how staff and patients will be accommodated if the primary location is unusable, whether alternate sites or remote workflows are feasible, and how utilities such as power and water will be maintained. Other suggestions include identifying critical equipment, with plans for rapid repair or replacement. Adequate insurance coverage for property damage and business interruption should also be reviewed as part of the planning process.

Communication Planning

Clear communication can significantly reduce confusion and anxiety during a disruption. Internally, consider establishing staff notification methods, role-specific instructions, and routine training or drills. Externally, plan for how to notify patients, vendors, and regulators of closures, delays, or data incidents. Pre-drafted communication templates and accessible contact lists can save valuable time when systems are down.

Vendor Coordination and Plan

Maintenance

Most practices rely on third-party vendors for IT, billing, and laboratory services. Consider including vendor contact information, service-level expectations, and an understanding of each vendor's own recovery capabilities in a DRP. Alternative workflows or vendors may be necessary during extended outages. Once developed, document the DRP, share with staff, and review regularly. Annual updates, drills, and tabletop exercises help ensure the plan remains effective as technology, personnel, and regulations evolve.

Conclusion

Disaster recovery planning is an essential safeguard for dental practices. By identifying risks, defining recovery objectives, securing data, preparing facilities, and training staff, practices can minimize disruption and recover more quickly when adverse events occur. While the benefits may not be visible day to day, a well-executed disaster recovery plan can protect patients, preserve trust, and ensure the long-term stability of the practice when it matters most.

For questions related to dental risk management, contact Dr. Julie Goldberg, Professional Dental Risk Specialist with PM Dental Protect, PMIG.

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