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*Source: BPA Publisher Statement, December 2008

THE TAKE-AWAYS

- High tech gadgets are fun toys, but they also can be useful clinical tools.
- Don't underestimate the "wow factor." Patients will talk about a practice using gadgets they're familiar with.

PUTTING TOYS TO WORK

Today's cutting-edge clinical technology allows dentists to do amazing things, but practices also can benefit from the far-reaching capabilities of the latest consumer gadgets.

by NOAH LEVINE

Instantly online More than 4 million Flip digital video cameras have been sold, and the included software makes uploading videos to the internet a snap.



In 1972, Gould & Eldredge proposed the concept of "punctuated equilibrium" to help explain evolution. Now before you all think I've slipped a cog and am

having PTSD flashbacks to a dental school lecture...hear me out. Evolution can be applied to living and non-living systems alike and we're going to see this in the next few years in the dental office.

Don't get me wrong. I know some pretty amazing devices have entered our profession in the last few years, but here I'm talking about the cutting-edge consumer technologies that are going to have an impact in dentistry.

One of the devices that has really changed the consumer landscape in less than a decade is the iPod, which has since evolved into the iPhone and its App Store. One of those "apps" is from Lexi-Comp, and it provides the equivalent of 13

textbooks containing info on endo, oral surgery, drugs and drug interactions among other topics. As Apple has evolved and diversified its product line, Lexi has followed. I now carry the 13 textbooks on my iPod Touch and on my brand new iPad as well. The slogan "There's an app for that" is more than jargon. For many of us, it's a rule we live our lives by.

The iPad and its coming wave of slate computing competition promises to bring a new level of mobility and communication to the dental office. Patient education software company Guru already has an iPad version that allows you to sit with a patient and share educational videos "one on one" from anywhere.

Of course, Apple isn't the only tech company changing things for the consumer and the dental professional. We're seeing tremendous gains made by RIM with its BlackBerry devices, Google with its Android OS as well as Palm with its WebOS. HP's recent purchase of Palm could mean major innovation

in the not-too-distant future. These smartphone companies have changed their devices from communication tools to life and business management tools.

I recently bought a Sprint OverDrive, which looks to be the future of mobile broadband. A standalone unit, OverDrive connects to the Sprint network at 4G or 3G speeds depending on what is available, and functions as my own private Wi-Fi "hotspot" allowing my laptop, iPod Touch, iPad and any other wireless devices to connect at blazing fast speeds; all of this from a device the size of two decks of cards. Now the Internet is with me wherever I go, and any Wi-Fi-enabled device I own has access.

The most impressive part of this conversation? These products are just the tip of the iceberg. Fortunately, you don't have to do all the research for these types of game changers yourself. Read on to learn how dentists and dental manufacturers are putting these technologies to use.

—Dr. John Flucke, Technology Editor

WEB EXCLUSIVE

For additional coverage of dentists using digital video to promote their practices, visit dentalproductsreport.com.

GETTING SMART

It wasn't so long ago when seeing someone walking down the street while chatting on a cell phone was a novel display of cutting-edge technology.

But the pace of technological development has never been more rapid, and today things have advanced so far that you're probably as likely to see people staring down at their phones, tapping away at touch-sensitive screens, than you are to see them holding the gadgets up to their ears to talk.

Ushered in by RIM's BlackBerry devices and pushed ahead by Apple's iPhone, the smartphone era is in full swing with the powerful pocket computers from those companies now in fierce competition with machines running Google's Android operating system or Palm's WebOS.

The cell phone-sized devices make the full Internet accessible from almost anywhere, and thus provide unprecedented access to remote data while simultaneously being location-aware and able to offer location-specific information applicable to where the user and the smartphone happen to be at that moment. With the rapid pace of advancement in the technologies that power the devices, these capabilities constantly grow more robust.

Forward-thinking dentists and dental manufacturers have taken notice of the amazing ways smartphones can help keep a practice running smoothly, even when key staff members are far from the office.

"Smartphones showing up in dentistry is a shade of what they're doing for everybody else in the world," said Paul Hinman, President of Liptak Dental Services, which provides computer and IT services along with education to dental offices worldwide. "These things are about being able to connect to whatever you want no matter where you are. It puts you in touch with your practice in ways you've never been in touch before."

Critical information

Access to practice management software via smartphones is achievable through the gadgets' Web browsers and the same portals that let dentists and staff log into their systems from their home computers via the Internet. However, the devices' small screen sizes can make looking at interfaces designed for computer monitors less than optimal, so companies, including PracticeWorks, the exclusive maker of Kodak Dental Systems, and Dentrix have created smartphone applications (often called "apps") to provide a more effective user experience when accessing the practice via smartphone.

"We didn't want to rebuild a whole practice management app for a phone device. That didn't make sense to us," said Bonnie Pugh, Product Line Manager for PracticeWorks when describing

the Kodak PEARL module, which brings PracticeWorks and SoftDent practice management software to the iPhone and many BlackBerry models.

"We were trying to address the on-the-go dentist who needed quick access to pertinent information," she added.

having Dentrix on her smartphone came in very handy when she got a call from a patient while on an out-of-state trip.

As a solo practitioner, being so deeply connected to her practice is a huge benefit to Dr. Gentner. Smartphone access to schedule and patient data is especially

has been extremely handy. After receiving an unintelligible voice mail from a patient, he was able to do a reverse look up to uncover just who had called so he could address their needs.

Of course, for the self-described early adapter of new technologies—both clinical

41 million

There are more than 41 million BlackBerry users worldwide.

Source: Research in Motion

"It's a quick data reference, so the doctor can make smarter decisions about patient care when they're not at the practice. It's meant to be that on-the-go application, so it's built for specific areas of information they need outside the office."

Those areas include access to patient information, the practice schedule and other critical information that might be useful if a dentist receives an emergency call from a patient or a staff member. The data is accessed from remote servers so no sensitive information is saved to the phone, and while a password is required to log in from a smartphone, Pugh said the service also can be turned off remotely for an added layer of security if a phone is lost.

Dr. Amy Gentner, a general practitioner from St. Johns, Mich., helped pilot Dentrix Mobile, and said she felt very comfortable accessing patient information via her BlackBerry Storm because the transmissions are encrypted and meet HIPAA standards. While she doesn't find the need to log in every day,

useful to practices that handle a high number of emergency cases, Pugh said, adding that she's aware of some practices that have a dedicated smartphone for use by the on-call dentist.



Remote records The PEARL module for Kodak Dental's PracticeWorks and SoftDent systems (kodakdental.com) provides secure access to patient files from just about anywhere.

An app for that

For Dr. Fred Peck, a Cincinnati general practitioner with a focus on cosmetic cases, Dentrix Mobile's ability to search his patient records by phone number

and consumer—accessing his practice from his iPhone was a natural step. Not only does Dr. Peck use his phone to log in to access his schedule and patient records, but he uses a variety of iPhone apps to keep his practice running while travelling for meetings or even vacations.

With copy-and-paste simplicity, Dropbox allows him to quickly and easily share images with his lab technician, and the program works equally well whether he's on a desktop computer or just checking in via iPhone. Dr. Peck also uses the Surepayroll app to manage his practice payroll, letting him manage his time differently because he can accomplish necessary tasks from anywhere.

"It was nice to just be able to log in to their system, put the hours in, and payroll was done from the iPhone," he said.

Future advancements

Of course, not everything is possible from the iPhone today. Both the PEARL module and Dentrix Mobile can help clinicians when patients call in need of prescriptions. They'll let the doctor verify that the patient is indeed theirs, and check his or her records to see what medications he or she



Ready for anything

Dentrix Mobile (dentrix.com) is compatible with smartphones from a range of manufacturers.



Smartphone scheduler

Remote access to the practice schedule is a key feature of Dentrix Mobile.

is on and if a new prescription is needed. However, it still takes a phone call to get the new prescription to the pharmacy, and Dr. Peck thinks this should be one of the next features added.

“One day, I’d like to be able to just push a button and have that go to the pharmacy,” he said.

The current smartphone technology is certainly capable

of handling tasks such as that. The top-of-the-line pocket-sized computers already are incorporating decent cameras with HD video, and their screens are getting bigger and sharper with each updated model. Dr. Peck said the technology is already there for an iPhone to be used for some diagnosis and referral needs, but just because the smartphones can process the data, doesn’t mean they represent the optimal tool for all digital dentistry.

“To look at a single x-ray it’s fine,” he said. “It’s got great

resolution and you can really see a single x-ray. I wouldn’t want to look at a panoramic x-ray, but for a single periapical, it’s fine.”

The diagnostic value of smartphones might be limited by screen size, but their processors can or soon will be up to the tasks of running the most complex of dental imaging software. However, Hinman said that with any computer it is important to target its use to the tasks best suited to its form, and for smartphones in dentistry those tasks really are the practice management duties.

New technologies can help make practices more efficient, but it always comes down to meeting patient needs. Better communication and access to information are invaluable, but they’re best used to augment chairside care rather than to supplant it.

“I don’t think we’re going to be moving away from the brick-and-mortar practitioner model anytime soon in dentistry,” Hinman said. “I don’t think technology will limit that, I think the patient experience will limit that. As it should.” ●

LAUNCHING PAD

Its creators call it magical. Its early champions call it amazing. Its detractors say they’re not sure just what it’s supposed to be or do. But one thing about it is certain: Apple’s iPad is the most talked-about piece of technology to hit the market this year.

Not quite a laptop, but more than a smartphone, the seemingly ubiquitous gadget is the first computer in tablet form to be affordably priced and widely commercially successful. With an eye-catching minimalism to its design, the keyboardless iPad is optimized for interfacing with all types of digital media, and the simplicity of the design carries over to the intuitive nature of using the device via the touchscreen interface.

The dental world has not been immune to the device’s charm, or the debate surrounding its usefulness. Dentists are already putting iPads to use in their practices, and dental technology companies are finding ways to incorporate it into their systems. And while some are not convinced the iPad is the tablet dentists need, the concepts of tablet computing and touchscreen interfaces enjoy wide support.

“It’s a really cool piece of technology,” said Matt Dorey, founder of Web-based practice management company Curve Dental. “When you feel the iPad and you use it, it really resonates with people. It emotionally captures them.

“I think what people like about it is the simplicity. It’s a computer, but it’s not really a computer. The iPad doesn’t have a lot of the traditional functionality you

expect in a computer, but what that does is, it makes it really fast and it makes it really simple. There’s finally this device out there for the layman and it’s really easy for them to do stuff on it.”

Front and center

Dorey sees great potential for bringing Curve to the iPad, but the key to making use of the device is finding functions that match

the device’s form factor and optimizing applications for the touchscreen interface.

Because it is web based, practice management data in a Curve system can be accessed from any device with a compatible web browser. Because the iPad’s touchscreen

interface does away with the concept of a mouse, Curve needs to create interfaces tailored specifically to the device, Dorey said.

One of the first places Curve plans to put the iPad to use is in practice reception areas as a digital clipboard for patient registration.

Rather than handing new patients a clipboard full of complex and intimidating forms, Dorey said the soon-to-be-released Curve iPad registration application will present patients with a simple interface where they will be guided through questions relevant to them as individuals. The patient information will be automatically saved to their file in the practice management database. The iPad is even capable of recording their digital signature.

Dentrix’s eCentral is available in a kiosk set up, and was recently launched for the iPad. The eCentral set up allows patients to update personal information in their files before appointments, and the iPad version of the software makes the kiosk portable for use anywhere in a practice.

Firsthand education

The next place Dorey hopes to take the iPad is into the operator’s office as a vehicle for delivering patient education. With its rich

2 million

Apple sold more than **2 million** iPads in just the first 60 days after the device’s April 3 launch.

Source: Apple



Tablet accessibility By using a remote desktop application, almost every feature of the desktop version of MacPractice (macpractice.com) can be used remotely through the iPad’s touchscreen interface.



Rugged slate technology XLDent practice management software (xldent.com) is optimized for use on Motion Computing's industrial strength tablet PCs.

multimedia capabilities and price tag as low as \$500, the iPad can be more cost-effective than integrating an operatory with a fully wired traditional AV set up.

Curve will have competition when it comes to patient education on the iPad. Henry Schein's Guru has released an iPad patient education application that allows dentists to put informative, interactive animations into their patients' hands.

"It gives the dentist a way to increase the appearance of the technology they're incorporating into the practice, and that can be huge for the patients. Technically, it's just a cool thing," said Guru founder Jeff Jackson, who added, "You can't base a product on just cool. It's got to be functional. It's got to get the job done for

both the patient who is using it and for the doctor who is going to be trusting it to bring their message to the patient."

Guru on the iPad comes as a free player download. Dentists can purchase individual animations or topic-specific packages of patient education videos. Patients can start and stop the player and interact with the animation by drawing on the screen.

"When the patient sits down in the chair and is handed an iPad, he'll automatically know how to use it," he said. "The doctor wants to help them make decisions, not train them on computer software."

The modular nature of Guru on an iPad is designed to let dentists purchase patient education on just the topics they want to use. Updates are delivered easily through

the iPad. The software is already set up to work in conjunction with a desktop version of Guru, so customized videos and animations created on the desktop can be sent to the iPad, something Jackson said is ideal for welcoming new patients.

Operatory aide

Even without dental-specific software for the device, the iPad is already showing up in operatories as a tool for case presentation. It allows dentists to put their digital imaging right into their patients' hands.

As an early adapter of technologies, Cincinnati general practitioner Dr. Fred Peck is excited about the arrival of the iPad he's ordered. He wants to use the device in and out of the operatory, and he believes it's important to use it in his practice as much as possible.

"I think there will be a lot of untapped potential there," he said. "It gives the practice a good image having all the technology when we use it. It's one thing to have the technology and have it collect dust, but it's another to have it and use it every day."

Already dedicated to the company's computing platform, MacPractice found adapting its practice management software for iPad use to be a natural move.

"We've been overwhelmed with requests from dentists who want to use MacPractice DDS MultiSpecialty on an iPad," said Mark Hollis, President of MacPractice.

By using a remote desktop app, MacPractice users can port their entire

practice management suite to the mobile tablet, allowing them to update charts, enter visit notes and review x-rays and photos from the iPad.

"Four patients were so impressed they scheduled appointments for suggested treatment," said Dr. Jonathan Ferencz after using MacPractice on his iPad with five patients. "Were they moved by a clearer vision of their clinical condition and the obvious need for treatment? Or were they impressed with the exquisite display of the iPad and our technical prowess? Frankly, it didn't matter. My goal is to use the software and hardware tools available to enhance patient care, and that is exactly what is happening."

Holding up

The iPad certainly stands out, but there are some in the industry who are still not convinced it is ready to stand up to everyday use in a busy dental practice. PEB XLDent was among the first to bring dental practice management to the tablet computer format, but while XLDent Vice President Andre Montgomery is a strong believer in the potential of tablet computing and is impressed by the iPad, he is not yet convinced it is the best tablet for dental use.

"It's a little early to say how these technologies are going to work and how they adapt," he said. "Based on what I'm seeing on the surface, I don't think they'll be quite strong enough."



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XLdent is optimized for use on devices such as Motion Computing's tablet PCs, which are fully-functional wireless PCs that run on a desktop operating system. Montgomery said that device is designed specifically for medical environments, and while it has a far larger price tag, it can be sprayed down with sterilizers and has a changeable battery.

Montgomery said the power of a wireless tablet in the dental

office is most apparent when the tablet can handle all of the practice's computing needs rather than just serving as a showpiece for a handful of targeted tasks.

Hinman also understands the iPad's appeal, but remains unconvinced that it's the best option for dentists. It may be an ideal replacement for the new-patient clipboard, but Hinman said a practice could easily set up a registration kiosk with an existing PC workstation by adding a touchscreen monitor.

"Having a private kiosk for check-in has a lot of wow factor," he said. "Probably not as much wow factor as the cool portable

Wow them right away

The eCentral Kiosk from Dentrix (dentrix.com) works with an iPad and gives a practice a high-tech look.



600,000

Apple and its carrier partners took pre-orders for more than **600,000** of the new iPhone 4 on June 15, the first day the new smartphone was available for pre-order ahead of its official launch on June 24.

Source: Apple

device, but you drop that tablet once and you're probably not going to be thinking about the wow factor anymore. Tablets are geared for bedside computing more than chairside, as in a medical environment. There is still no denying the cool factor and the patients' impression of your overall attention to their care, however."

The power of cool

Still, there is power in being able to wow patients with a practice's technology. Even if he remains unmoved by the

hype around the iPad, Montgomery is a big proponent of the advent of tablet computing and hopes to see a more robust market with other tablet devices competing with the iPad.

"With a tablet PC, you're able to bring the computer to the patient," he said. "We see this as the future of dentistry. It's so much more powerful than pointing to an LCD screen up in the corner of the room."

The form factor feels right to everyone putting tablet computers to work, and both Jackson and Dorey believe there is

something to be gained by putting some of the buzz around the iPad to work for a dental practice. Patients who are handed an iPad during their appointment will remember that dentist, and likely will mention the experience to friends, Dorey said. Adding an iPad to a practice is a simple way to make the patient experience more enjoyable, Jackson added.

"It might just be the hype around it, but when you put an iPad in your hand you almost can't help but smile just a little bit," he said. ●



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