

A Virtual Credit Card? At this Dental Practice, Forget About It!

Don't even think of sending Dr. Sara Stuefen, D.D.S., a virtual credit card for a claim payment.

"We work diligently to call companies when they send us VCCs because we're not going to accept that as a payment," said Stuefen.

Really. She means it.

"My staff has been instructed not to process the payment," said Stuefen, who has owned her dental practice in Vinton, Iowa, since 2010.

While some dentists are losing big money to VCC fees, Stuefen said in her office "the cost of VCCs is the amount of staff time that my office manager spends sitting on hold to get the payment switched to a check or EFT."

In fact, Stuefen would be very happy if every claim payment arrived by EFT.

START SMALL, THINK BIG

Like many dental practices, Stuefen's is relatively small. She's the only dentist, along with two hygienists, two chairside assistants and an office manager.



Dr. Sara Stuefen, D.D.S.

But she said office size shouldn't be a barrier to any dentist switching to EFT. In her case they started small with one insurer.

"The main thing for us was understanding the system and how to make it work in our practice. Once we had that figured out it was easy to ramp it up from there."

Signing up with each company was fairly easy, she said, requiring minimal effort—often little more than completing a form and mailing a voided check.

Today, Stuefen receives EFT claim payments from all insurance companies she's in network with. It's only the out-of-network ones where there are occasional issues, such as getting a VCC.

"It's much faster," she said of EFT. "Our biggest payer that we work with generally pays us in less than a week—which is significantly different than when we were waiting for a check to come in the mail."

And keeping track is easy because her bank emails a daily record of all transactions in that account.

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

When Stuefen and her office manager started accepting EFT claim payments, collaboration was key. She allowed the office manager to experiment and offer feedback to determine what the best procedures would be for the practice.

"I think that's what made it work so well because now she's really running all of it. Today I'm not having to worry about it. Working together as a team played a huge part," said Stuefen.

That team includes one of the hygienists and one of the assistants knowing how to do at least some of the EFT functions. Cross-training is so important in a small dental practice, because you can't have things coming to a standstill during vacations and illnesses.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Just as a small practice shouldn't fear at least dipping a toe into the EFT waters, nor should they be afraid of standing up for their rights. Stuefen and her staff aren't shy when it comes to that.

They know that federal rules make it clear that when they—or any other dental or medical practice—request claim payments via EFT, insurers must comply. And those EFTs have to be free. There's no requirement that providers pay for any special services that some insurers try their best to sell. "The companies that make it so difficult to get out of the VCCs are the ones that will say, 'We'll do an EFT for you, but we're going to charge you,'" said Stuefen. Typically, she said, they'll push a package of EFT services highlighting that the cost is lower than credit card fees.

"That," said Stuefen, "is not acceptable to us, either."

NOTHING TO FEAR

But despite minor bumps in the road like that, Stuefen is convinced EFT claim payments are the way to go, even for the smallest dental office.

"I would just encourage people to take on EFTs," she said. "There's nothing to be scared of. And it's definitely helped our practice."

There are many other dental practices across the nation that could benefit from making the

switch. As the 2019 CAQH Index noted, only 13% of dental claims are paid electronically, compared to 70% of medical claims. It's a tidy sum, because were the dental industry to fully adopt electronic administrative transactions, it could save \$3.4 billion a year, the Index estimated.

And it puts the lion's share of that savings—\$2.9 billion—with providers.

"That's a lot of money left on the table, and it can have a real impact, particularly with smaller dental practices," said Brad Smith, Nacha Senior Director, ACH Network Administration and Industry Verticals.

"Not only do electronic claim payments save time and money, they make life easier for practitioners and their staffs."

"While it might seem daunting at first, there's a wealth of helpful information available from Nacha, the American Dental Association and others," said Smith. "Once electronic claim payments are up and running, dental practices will wonder why they hadn't done it sooner."



Learn more about dental EFT payments:

nacha.org/achfordental

Nacha's Brad Smith can be reached at:

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The American Dental Association has more on electronic funds transfers, including an EFT Payments Implementation Checklist:

ada.org/resources/practice/dental-insurance/dental-insurance-resources/optimize-dental-practice-administration-and-efficiencies

The American Medical Association has a free toolkit available to help navigate EFT:

<http://ama-assn.org/media/11081/download>