Get Excited about Your Steri-Center

by Karen Daw, MBA
You're probably thinking, “Why do we need another article about the steri-center?” I understand: It’s not the most exciting topic. Yet it has a real impact on your practice.

The steri-center is an area that can cause anxiety when you consider all the thought that must go into designing the ideal space. The design must allow instruments to flow safely and effortlessly to and from the operatories, and in a way that prevents your team members from tripping over each other.

In addition, significant cost goes into this area for design, construction, equipment, instruments, and training needed to keep the practice moving efficiently. Some practices regrettably justify implementing only the bare minimum in design, because this area is not viewed as a direct revenue-generating department.

Fortunately, proper planning now can save you in the long run. A well thought-out steri-center allows for better allocation of time and resources, which can increase productivity, and in turn translates to dollars saved.
Step one is to think of the steri-center as the heart of the practice. If the instruments stop flowing properly, the whole operation comes to a grinding halt. In fact, sterile instruments travel to the operatory much like arteries move oxygen-rich blood throughout the body. Contaminated instruments return to the steri-center, as veins return blood to the heart, and the process repeats itself. Like any muscle, this area needs to be treated with care and attention to keep the system in peak condition.

New practices and those seeking to enhance this space need to fully understand the requirements and recommendations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the steri-center should be centrally located and physically (or at a minimum, spatially) separated into four distinct areas:

- Receiving/Cleaning/Decontamination
- Preparation/Packaging
- Sterilization
- Sterile Storage

The key is to ensure there is no cross-contamination by allowing for enough space to process instruments in a safe and efficient manner.
Rethinking Your Steri-center

Is your practice doing everything the CDC recommends?

**Receiving, Cleaning, and Decontamination**
- Minimize handling of loose instruments (e.g., cassettes) and use a covered container to transport contaminated instruments
- Use automated cleaning equipment (e.g., ultrasonic cleaner or HYDRIM® instrument washer)
- Wear heavy-duty utility gloves for cleaning instruments, and masks, eyewear, and gown if splashing or spraying occurs

**Preparation and Packaging**
- Use an internal chemical indicator in each package and an external indicator if the internal one can’t be seen from the outside
- Use only FDA cleared wraps, pouches, and containers
- Inspect instruments for debris before sterilization and avoid sterilizing unwrapped instruments

**Sterilization**
- Packages should be loosely placed into the sterilizer and loaded per manufacturers’ instructions
- Do not use instruments if mechanical or chemical indicators indicate inadequate processing
- Run a biological indicator (spore strip) with a matching control at least weekly and always with an implantable device

**Sterile Storage**
- Place the date and sterilizer used on the outside of the packaging
- Use instruments only if the packaging has not been compromised during storage
- Packages with holes or tears should be cleaned, packed, and sterilized again
- Store in covered or closed cabinets
Automated systems can assist with many steps in the four areas of the steri-center. If you have been waiting for a hands-free process to automatically fill the autoclave with distilled water, lubricate handpieces, or clean, rinse, and dry instruments at the touch of a button, the future is here. All of these systems are now available.

The proper equipment in the steri-center can free up team members to perform other responsibilities, reducing labor costs and increasing efficiency.
Once you understand the elements of a properly designed instrument processing area, you should also review if the steri-center is up to SciCan’s SPECs. Does it:

- Improve Safety
- Ensure Predictable results
- Maximize Efficiency
- Maintain Compliance

Notice how “Safety” comes first? The Occupational, Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires your office to promote practices that minimize staff exposure to contaminated sharps. Reducing the risk of injury to employees impacts practice profitability. For example, the average cost of an emergency room visit is over $1,000, not including the cost of initial and ongoing lab tests, post-exposure prophylaxis, and follow-up appointments.

Automated systems also help to increase the predictable outcome of clean, sterile instruments. As automation is much more efficient than manual processes, team members won’t be stressed about making instrument processing their primary focus.

Finally, having the proper systems in place ensures compliance with state and federal requirements.
If price were no object, you’d have the latest, most advanced equipment and a full-time staff to manage all the instruments. You might not have everything you want, but you can certainly have a steri-center design that promotes safe practices, allows for growth, and incorporates automation.

Staff members thoroughly trained in proper instrument processing can help identify opportunities to improve this space. They are also more likely to speak up when something is amiss. Combined with an automated cleaning process, an engaged team can save time, increase productivity, reduce potential injury to employees, and mitigate infection control risks.

Encourage staff to attend continuing education events to stay abreast of the latest in sterilization and infection prevention. In addition, download CDC and OSHA information pertaining to this area. The CDC’s latest infection control summary has an entire section dedicated to training personnel and instrument processing.
One of my doctors contacted me about placing a plaque in his waiting area that says:

“For your health and safety, this office meets or exceeds all prescribed government standards for sterilization and infection control.”

That is a brilliant idea. This sign does two things: First, it reinforces your commitment to safety. Second, it plants the seed in the minds of patients about something they may not have considered before. For a business that relies heavily on word-of-mouth promotions, getting patients to think about everything that goes on behind the scenes is a great public relations move.

Have you considered taking new or prospective patients on a tour of the office? The sterilization area should be a point-of-pride for the practice. Patients should always feel like they are receiving quality care in a safe environment.

Taking Control of Your Infection Control

Need assistance creating the steri-center of your dreams? The great news is there are numerous experts ready to guide you through the entire process. Contact your local safety consultant, sales representative, or manufacturer. Finally, consider joining a professional dental safety group such as the Organization for Safety, Asepsis and Prevention (www.osap.org).

Let’s get excited about your steri-center again!
Karen Daw, MBA, CECM is an Authorized OSHA Trainer, speaker, and consultant. Her high-energy presentations and articles utilize humor and real-world stories to educate. Her experience includes roles as Assistant Director of the Sterilization Monitoring Service, Clinic Health and Safety Director for the Ohio State University College of Dentistry, and OSHA advisor to medical and dental facilities across the country.

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**Gentle**
The fresh water feature guarantees fresh water with every cycle. Fresh water reduces the build up of oils and debris.

**Versatile**
BRAVO™ offers a number of filling & draining options, including a front manual fill and rear automatic fill option that can pull water from a 10L remote bottle placed up to 6 feet away.

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  - Active ingredient, Hydrogen Peroxide, breaks down into water and oxygen.
  - No active residues reduce environmental impact.
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  - ½ as many wipes as the leading competitor are needed to keep your surface wet long enough to achieve disinfection.
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1 John Molinari, PhD, Peri Nelson, BS, and Devi J.V. Raghavan, BDS. Optim 1 Cleaning and Disinfection Study. Ann Arbor: Dental Advisor, 2016.

