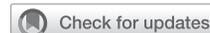


ANGER MANAGEMENT

Dealing with angry patients



BACKGROUND

Anger can occur in the dental office, along with many other emotions. Dentists will experience the anger of patients who feel upset with treatment or other aspects of care. When the anger escalates, the dentist must step in to ensure that staff members and other patients are safe.

CAUSES AND MANIFESTATIONS OF ANGER

Irate patients can be angry because they are faced with unplanned expenses, unnecessary treatment plans, failure to achieve the results they hoped for, or the dentist' refusal to practice outside the standard of care when that's what the patient wants. If the patient's anger manifests as threatening behaviors, an intervention by the practice owner is required. Staff and other patients must be protected from patients who yell, curse, stalk, or become violent. Those in the dental office should feel safe and not fearful of an escalated situation.

RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS

Often the best course of action is to remain calm in the face of an angry patient. The dentist should adopt a calm, professional approach and let the individual know that he or she is willing to listen to the patient's concerns. The dentist and patient should sit down in a private setting away from other people. The dentist should then assure the patient that he or she is willing to listen to any concerns. Having a willingness to listen and offering a compassionate ear can help to diffuse the situation.

The dentist must also set boundaries, indicating what is and isn't achievable and realistic. Patients cannot be allowed to dictate the dentist's treatment or persuade the dentist to practice at less than the standard of care.

If the situation becomes tense, a third person can be added to the discussion, such as an office manager or other staff person

who has a good relationship with the patient. This individual can help to explain the situation and facilitate the patient's understanding.

If a refund is demanded, the dentist has the right to provide it. Doing so is not an admission of wrongdoing but instead is a way to resolve the situation in a mutually agreed-upon compromise.

Should all of these efforts fail and the threatening behavior continue, it may be wise to consider dismissing the patient from care. Before dismissal, the dentist should ensure that the patient is not in the midst of any treatment. All steps to remove the patient from care should follow a formal dismissal procedure.

Clinical Significance

Dentists sometimes have to deal with angry patients in the dental office. Some anger can be understandable, but the escalation into threatening behavior that is aggressive toward others or even violent cannot be tolerated. The dentist should be prepared to keep calm, offer a chance to talk through the situation, and be willing to provide a refund. It's also wise to have a procedure in place that includes having staff members trained in de-escalating behaviors so that patients who become angry can be managed effectively. These steps can help to avoid situations that place staff and patients at risk.

TDIC Risk Management Staff: Remain calm when faced with irate patients. *J Calif Dent Assoc* 47:123-124, 2019

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