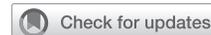


PATIENT MANAGEMENT

Meeting patient concerns



BACKGROUND

There is nothing wrong with setting the goal of delivering high-quality dental services to every patient who comes to the dental practice. The problem is that every dental practice should be doing that and it's often difficult for a patient to know if high-quality dental services are being delivered. Most patients simply don't have sufficient knowledge of the relevant standards for care to judge whether one practice is better than others. What can differentiate a dental office from others is the ability of the dentist and staff to address patients' feelings, finances, and time concerns—concerns that matter to patients.

VALUE OF PATIENT INTERACTIONS

Dental practices must recognize that despite their best efforts, it's impossible for them to always please every patient in every situation. All they can do is their best in any patient encounter. Interactions between dental office personnel and patients are the one thing that patients will remember and see as the basis for judging the value of a dental practice. How they view the practice will determine whether they will stay with it and what they will tell others about it, and ultimately will help to determine how successful the practice can become. The universal patient concerns of personal feelings, finances, and time should be equally important to the dental office staff if they are to connect positively with patients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some specific suggestions can be made to help guide dentists and their staff members in providing patient interactions that will be viewed positively by patients. These include taking steps to show that patient time is valued, that patients themselves are valued, and that their commitment to the practice is valued.

1. Dentists should apologize every time they run late and make patients wait. Unless this is done, patients receive the message that their time is not as important as the dentist's time, which implies that they're not as important. Patients need to hear and see that their time is valued. If the dentist apologizes for being late, most patients will receive that apology graciously and remember that the dentist made the effort to make them feel valued.
2. Patients should always be greeted as if they are coming into the dentist's home. Often patients are in the reception area and are called into the operatory area by an assistant who quickly turns and walks to the operatory without waiting for the patient. The patient is left to gather things up and find where the assistant has disappeared to. The proper greeting would be for the assistant to courteously come to where the patient is seated, greet him or her warmly, wait as the

patient gathers things together, and accompany the patient to the operatory. Not only will the patient feel valued, but other patients in the waiting room will notice.

3. Home-made visual aids can be the best way to demonstrate what the dentist wants the patient to know. Explanations should be delivered by the dentist in person and should be accompanied by visual aids prepared specifically for the practice. Patients will appreciate the care shown by the practice taking this step and making the effort to explain procedures or conditions personally.
4. It's important that patients feel the dentist appreciates their patronage. That message can be conveyed by having the dentist write a note to about 5 patients a week that says something like, "I just wanted to let you know that the staff and I agree that you are one of our favorite patients." People find it hard not to like someone who likes them. In addition, having a handwritten note is a rarity and will convey value to the patient.
5. Dentists should take the time to evaluate the appearance of their offices from the perspective of the patient. Doing so may reveal signs that are obscured by overgrowth, holes in the parking lot, cracks in the sidewalk, uncomfortable seating in the reception area, or other unpleasant or dangerous conditions. Patients notice these things and it affects how they think about the practice. Having them noticed and addressed by the dentist would be appreciated.

Clinical Significance

Viewing dental care from the patient's perspective can yield valuable information about what's needed to address what's most important to patients. Dentists may strive for quality in their delivery of dental care, but most patients simply don't have the clinical knowledge to know if what's being done is better than what another dental practice does. Because of this, dentists should consider issues related to how the office makes patients feel, how he or she can show concern for what is important to patients, and how the practice staff can make a better impression on patients. Patients will talk about their dental visits in a more positive way if their concerns are addressed effectively.

Asmus DG: The universal patient concerns you should not ignore. *Dent Econ* 108:28, 30, 2018

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