

Smooth as glass

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You've finally finished paying those tuition bills for your 3 children, and you made your last mortgage payment a month ago. Your practice is humming along nicely, especially since you've hired an associate who has improved your referral rate and given you more vacation time. You finally feel you're at the top of your game. And because you and your wife are "empty-nesters," you no longer need that big SUV that's taken you and the family on so many road trips over the years.

You decide you might as well get the car you've always dreamed of owning. Early one Saturday morning, you take a ride to the dealership to look at the latest in automotive excellence. A sleek silver-gray convertible catches your eye. It's got a 5-speed manual transmission—just like your first car—with sport wheels that look great. The salesman is a pro. He immediately senses that you're hooked just sitting in the car in the showroom. He dangles the keys in front of you and the 2 of you take an identical model out for a spin.

Twenty minutes later, you sit down to determine the price. You tell him you'll need a day or two to think about it. You try not to look too eager to close the deal because you certainly want to be sure the price is right. Just as you tell him you'll be in touch soon, he tosses the keys on the desk in front of you. "Take it, Doc," he says. "No deposit needed. I'll just copy your license, and you let me know if it's a go after you get a full feel for how she handles."

The following Monday you call the salesman and tell him you're sold. You picture his victorious smile on the other end of the line.

Nudging is the act of guiding people toward a desired outcome without restricting their opportunity to make choices. A famous example of nudging from a social perspective is the practice of painting a housefly on the inside of a urinal to encourage users "to take better aim." Another example is placing healthy food choices at eye level at a supermarket.¹ Nudging can be described as pointing people toward favorable behavior by

presenting the desired option as a default.² Because almost all of us object to limitations on our ability to choose, or to failure to provide autonomy, nudging guides consumers toward the desired goal without obviously depriving them of options.

The fundamental difference in knowledge levels between the doctor and the patient is indisputable. Consider the office in which the parent of nearly every third-grader examined is emphatically told that maxillary expansion is needed, and production of the appliance is immediately initiated. The family is advised to call if they decide to decline treatment. Or an adult who enters an office seeking an opinion to resolve crowded lower incisors and leaves the office in lower anterior brackets—after an additional scan to promptly initiate maxillary aligner therapy. It's assumed that diagnostic records can be collected at a subsequent visit. There's no assessment of periodontal involvement or active caries. No restorative consultation for replacement of those absent mandibular first molars. The nudge, or the default, is the patient's anticipated acceptance of treatment. It's a contemporary practice-building technique, but does this form of subliminal direction affect the patient's or family's ability to make well informed autonomous decisions?^{3,4}

In the short weekend that you had that car, you decided you would never give it up. It's now part of you, and you can work that stick shift as easily as you can bend an offset at a lower first molar. You're too content to know it, but you've been nudged.

Truly effective for car sales, but is it appropriate—and ethical—for health care?

REFERENCES

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