The Communication Process: the Art of Managing Patient Expectations

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If you were to book a beach holiday after looking through a brochure that showed images of beautiful beaches and crystal clear waters, you would travel to your destination with those images dominating your expectations. You would then be somewhat disappointed if you found yourself on a stony beach next to murky waters. Your immediate thought might be that you have spent a lot of money on this holiday or that you had been misled and you might decide to never book a beach holiday again. You would experience a sense of injustice too.

The same can be said of the expectations of a dental patient. When a patient visits a dentist, they will have a level of expectation. If they are a returning patient, the service they received previously will set the level of expectation. For new patients, expectations will be set perhaps by the experience of others who have used the service. However they have arrived at their level of expectation, when those expectations are not met by a dentist, or their practice team, it can lead to patient dissatisfaction. A patient left unhappy by their experience may feel similar to the disappointed holiday goer – out of pocket and unlikely ever to book your services again. The sense of ‘injustice’ may then also lead to a complaint and the patient will choose a path of redress that, in their mind, addresses the injustice with the minimum effort and cost.

Communication is a Process

Good communication is one of the most important tools a dental professional can use to identify, manage and meet patient expectations.

Consider the following scenario:

A new patient attends your surgery based on the good feedback they have received from one of your current patients. They wish to have complicated and potentially expensive cosmetic treatment carried out by you ahead of a job interview coming up in three weeks.

The scenario presents a number of potential expectation management pitfalls to the dental professional, all of which should be addressed carefully to avoid the patient leaving the surgery being unhappy with the treatment.

In the first instance, when a new patient attends a surgery having been recommended by a current patient, it is important to recognize that their expectations have been set by the experience of another. While your current patient may have had very routine treatment completed to their complete satisfaction, new patient’s needs may be very different as may their
tolerance level to service delivery. It is therefore our responsibility as their dentist to ensure we have listened and fully understood their personal expectations. We can adopt certain actions to encourage effective listening by not interrupting when the patient is attempting to explain their concerns, paraphrasing back to the patient demonstrating what we have understood and being aware of the patient’s body language and cues.

It is of course important to understand why a patient has changed their dentist. We know that location of practice is one of the key determinants of choice and the patient may have moved to your area; however they may also have been dissatisfied with their previous dentist's treatment or service. The first consultation provides an ideal opportunity to discover and discuss your new patient’s expectations.

If the patient has expressed an interest in expensive and/or extensive cosmetic treatment, they will have, like the brochure about the beach, an image in their mind of how the treatment will impact their appearance. It is important to explore the motivation of the patient. As dentists we can explain the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ elements of care by discussing treatment options and procedural elements of care and timelines. However, it is equally important to ascertain the ‘why’. In cases where the treatment is indicated for oral health the ‘why’ element relates to health and it will be the dentist that will discuss the benefits to the patient.

Cosmetic dentistry is an elective intervention and the ‘why’ question must be asked of and answered by the patient. This will help to determine the motivation which is often centred on self-image and confidence but can mask underlying psychological reasons. This discussion within the examination process is especially important when considering any elective treatment and should not be rushed. It will be a significant factor in whether we believe the treatment the patient has requested is feasible and attainable to the aesthetic standard the patient desires.

By explaining all clinical aspects with regard to any proposed treatment plan, we need to gauge the patient’s reaction when you share similar expectations of treatment outcomes or if the patient’s expectations appear to be notably different. If a patient cannot modify their expectations then alarm bells may start ringing and you may feel it would be sensible to decline treatment and refer the patient elsewhere or simply advise the patient you will not be able to produce the outcome the patient is demanding.

Clinical computer software is frequently being used to increase patient awareness of treatment options and generate post-operative images of proposed treatment. Whilst this new software can be helpful, it can also run the danger of creating expectations that cannot be met. It is important to ensure that the patient understands what is realistically achievable, at what cost and the risks and benefits of the treatment. The gap between experience and expectation must be managed from the outset.

It should be an ongoing process that applies before, during and after their treatment. By involving patients in any decision making, you are empowering them and also providing a good opportunity for them to discuss any questions or concerns they may have. A patient, who has been actively involved in this process and has assumed responsibility for a decision, is perhaps less likely to criticise a clinician should some aspects of the treatment outcome be not quite as expected.

How to Handle an Unhappy Patient

Post treatment communication is just as important as any discussions that take place prior or during treatment. Following any treatment, it is essential to appraise your patient’s level of satisfaction. If a patient appears unhappy, you should ensure that their concerns are listened to and addressed in a timely manner. Of course it will always be preferable to resolve any complaint by local resolution within the dental surgery. By ignoring or not engaging with an unhappy patient, there is a risk the patient decides to escalate their concerns into another forum such as a regulatory challenge with the Dental Council or through a claim for compensation.

Therefore it is in a dentist’s best interest to acknowledge any complaints or negative feedback from a patient as soon as possible. While it can seem daunting to have to deal with a complaint, by having a formal process such as a practice complaint policy for managing them in practice, along with seeking advice from your indemnity provider, you can reduce the risk of escalation and focus on providing great care for your patients.