Communication skills in the dental practice

Dr Imneet Madan, UAE

Practice principles are usually confined to each individual practice. Yet, there are some fundamental principles of business interaction that are widely accepted and can be considered universal. In the following, an overview of clinically proven, modified and researched principles will be given that can improve both interpersonal and dentist-to-patient communication skills.

Core principles of dental practice

The concern of the patient and the reason for his or her visit should always be the main focus of the appointment. The consulted dentist should give an opinion on the health status of the patient and guide him or her through the different possible treatment options, with the aim of resolving the reason for the patient's visit. Moreover, the patient should always leave the dental office with his or her questions answered, thus feeling satisfied with the outcome of the visit. Apart from that, there should be a strong focus on the individual needs of every single patient. For example, there is a wide variety of reasons for a patient being apprehensive regarding dentist appointments, which include concerns about his or her dental health and possible high treatment expenses. Since the patient is, of course, usually no expert in the field of dentistry, he or she can have a hard time understanding all information that is provided by the dentist. From a patient's point of view, the ideal dentist should meet the following requirements:

1. The dentist should be empathetic. He or she needs to truly understand the patient and his or her point of view in order to treat the patient in the best possible way. Only by being empathetic and by putting himself or herself in the shoes of the patient can the patient's concerns and needs be sufficiently taken care of.

2. The dentist should be approachable. When explaining treatment plans to the patient, it is vital for the dentist to use language that is easy to understand. He or she should be able to break down a complicated medical procedure into its simplest components. Naturally, the dentist is exposed to subject-specific jargon on a day-to-day basis; however, there are patients who are not familiar with even the simplest dental terms, such as "enamel" or "dentine". The dentist must not make the mistake of presuming the patient's complete understanding when explaining a treatment.

   Employing pictorial visualisations or video presentations can be very useful in order to help the patient to better understand certain medical procedures. While explaining, the dentist should pause from time to time to check with the patient whether he or she has any questions. By doing that, the provided information is



more likely to be thoroughly understood by the patient. These pauses can furthermore help the patient in making a clear and informed decision regarding the treatment option to be chosen. Moreover, the dentist needs to give the patient space and must not pressure him or her into making any hasty decisions. After all, the consent to a treatment plan is referred to as "informed consent" and not "imposed consent".

3. The dentist needs to be confident and well informed. It is vital for the dentist to possess an in-depth knowledge of the particular treatment options that he or she is proposing with regard to his or her previously made diagnosis. If the dentist's professional knowledge and confidence are limited in some way, the patient will most likely perceive that. Moreover, the dentist should offer different possible treatment options in order for the patient to develop a feeling of control and involvement, as no one likes being patronised or merely being told what to do. In order to provide the best possible treatment and to improve on his or her confidence, the dentist is encouraged to update his or her skills and professional knowledge on a regular basis.

4. The dentist needs to be patient. Even if questions are asked repeatedly, the dentist needs to tackle them with respect and answer them calmly. Patience is the key to winning the patient's trust and is required at all times during the appointment.

5. The dentist needs to be open to financial questions. It has been frequently noticed that many dentists tend to leave the financial matters to coordinators and many practices encourage this system. It is not wrong to do so as long as both the dentist and patient are happy to have assigned third parties involved in their discussions. In order to save a great deal of time and effort, however, the dentist should be open to financial questions during the appointment. Any questions in this regard should be treated with respect and should not be taken personally, as money is an important factor contributing to the patient's decision regarding treatment options.

6. The dentist needs to be experienced. Naturally, reading the newest literature and attending conferences or lectures can contribute significantly to both the dentist's skill set and his or her overall experience. Furthermore, it is essential for the dentist to learn from other people's failures. With regard to a specific treatment plan, the possibility of failure can even be discussed with the patient. Failure is nothing to be afraid of and a risk that needs to be openly discussed. As long as the patient is financially secured and a good relationship with the consulted dentist has been

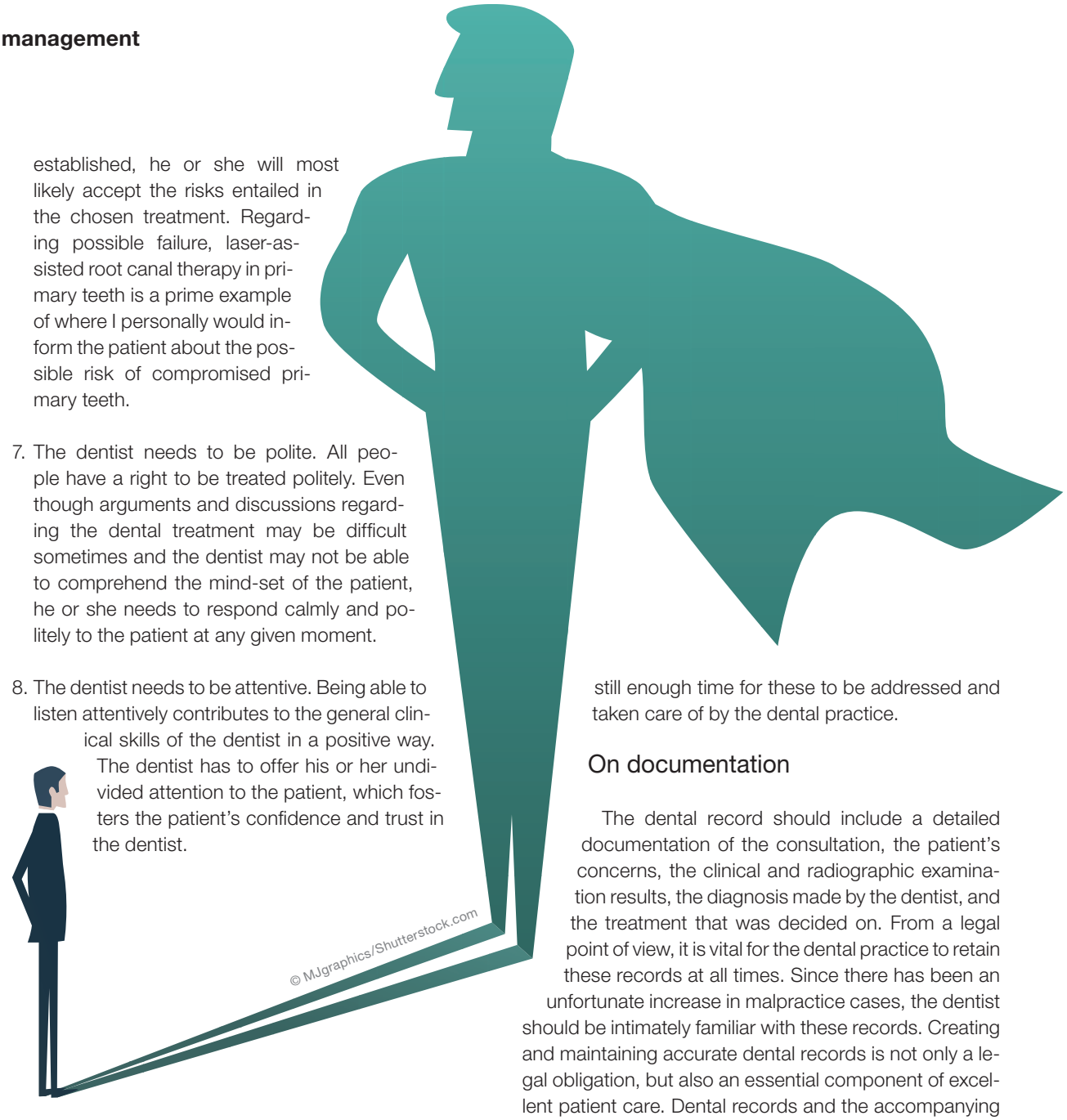


© Mjgraphics/Shutterstock.com

established, he or she will most likely accept the risks entailed in the chosen treatment. Regarding possible failure, laser-assisted root canal therapy in primary teeth is a prime example of where I personally would inform the patient about the possible risk of compromised primary teeth.

7. The dentist needs to be polite. All people have a right to be treated politely. Even though arguments and discussions regarding the dental treatment may be difficult sometimes and the dentist may not be able to comprehend the mind-set of the patient, he or she needs to respond calmly and politely to the patient at any given moment.

8. The dentist needs to be attentive. Being able to listen attentively contributes to the general clinical skills of the dentist in a positive way. The dentist has to offer his or her undivided attention to the patient, which fosters the patient's confidence and trust in the dentist.



After the initial appointment, but before the treatment

Both the communication approach of neurolinguistic programming and the techniques of Six Sigma can help in articulating and planning the medical treatment during the appointment at the dental office. Once the patient has understood the entire treatment plan, the first step should be for him or her to complete and sign the informed consent form, which states the understanding of the medical treatment. Afterwards, copies of the treatment plan should be given to the patient and further scanned copies should be kept for the clinic records. In order to aid the patient's decision regarding a particular treatment option, relevant literature should be given to him or her afterwards. The patient should use the interim period between the initial consultation and the actual treatment to think about his or her decision. In case of potential questions arising during that period, there is still enough time for these to be addressed and taken care of by the dental practice.

On documentation

The dental record should include a detailed documentation of the consultation, the patient's concerns, the clinical and radiographic examination results, the diagnosis made by the dentist, and the treatment that was decided on. From a legal point of view, it is vital for the dental practice to retain these records at all times. Since there has been an unfortunate increase in malpractice cases, the dentist should be intimately familiar with these records. Creating and maintaining accurate dental records is not only a legal obligation, but also an essential component of excellent patient care. Dental records and the accompanying clinical notes need to be well written and sufficiently detailed and should include the following information:

1. clinical findings;
2. descriptions of radiographs;
3. proof and documentation if radiographs were handed out to the patient;
4. record of the main points of the verbal discussion with the patient;
5. relevant and meaningful comments made by the patient;
6. explanation of treatment options;
7. the patient's attitude towards the proposed treatment;
8. a summary of the course of the appointment (for example, a child's behaviour during the appointment);
9. signed consent forms regarding the treatment that was finally decided on;
10. copies of the consent forms; and
11. re-signed consent forms in case of deviations from the original treatment plan.

How to document properly

Owing to a tight schedule and thus a lack of time, dentists often tend to scribble their notes quickly onto a mere piece of paper. However, typing their notes on computer is a better alternative. Proper documentation results in a stress-free daily practice. Proper documentation can be quite time-consuming at first, yet it will most likely save a great deal of time and energy in the long run. With regard to the proper documentation of dental records, the following points can be of help:

1. Always use the same font and format when typing the records.
2. Use the same headings and titles throughout the entire record.
3. Put any comments by the patient in quotation marks if verbatim.
4. Elaborate on concerns that you have expressed. Document any concessions towards the patient. If a patient has unobtainable and unrealistic demands, genuine gestures of good-will and kindness can help in a possible malpractice case.
5. Avoid derogatory and unprofessional remarks in the notes. Any negative comments, such as the patient being late for an appointment, or any other disruptive behavior should be noted in an objective and rational fashion.
6. Use standardised and internationally accepted abbreviations in order to make your documentation comprehensible for dental professionals from around the globe.

Conclusion

The attributes of the ideal dentist as detailed in this article should be taken to heart by every dentist who aims to create his or her dream practice. A clear communication strategy is vital for developing a patient's understanding of subject-specific topics, with regard to his or her dental treatment options. Moreover, both the dentist's empathy and in-depth professional knowledge play a key role in providing the best possible treatment. Furthermore, he or she needs to provide information in a generous and comprehensive fashion in order for the patient to feel like the most important person in the practice. It is essential that information is provided in such a way that the patient is able to understand everything in detail, even though he or she is not a dental professional himself or herself. This results in growing trust and a long-term bond between the patient and the dental practice. After all, it is not the number of patients being theoretically attracted to a particular practice that is important, but rather the number of patients who return to that practice on a regular basis.

contact

Dr Imneet Madan
Laser Pediatric Dentist
NLP Coach
Six Sigma Green Belt
MDS (Pediatric Dentistry)
MSc (Laser Dentistry, AALZ, RWTH Aachen University)
Children's Dental Center, Dubai
Villa 1020 Al Wasl Road
Umm Suqeim 1, Dubai
United Arab Emirates
Phone: +971 506823462
imneet.madan@yahoo.com
www.drmichaels.com

Author details

Kurz & bündig

Die Autorin nähert sich in diesem Artikel dem Blickpunkt des Zahnarztpatienten und stellt in diesem Zuge einige Kernpunkte dar, die bei der Wahl des „idealen Zahnarztes" helfen können. So sollte der aufzusuchende Zahnarzt zunächst empathisch sein, da nur durch aufmerksames Zuhören und das Verstehen der Sorgen und Ängste des Patienten am Ende die bestmögliche Behandlung erfolgen kann. Darüber hinaus sollte der Zahnarzt unter anderem nahbar, selbstbewusst, geduldig und offen gegenüber finanziellen Fragen sein. Auch sollte er dem Patienten Behandlungsoptionen zu Verfügung stellen, um ihm das Gefühl zu vermitteln, er könne aktiv mitentscheiden, was die Wahl der durchzuführenden Behandlung betrifft. All dies schafft eine langfristige Bindung zwischen dem Patienten und der aufgesuchten Zahnarztpraxis.

In einem weiteren Schritt umreißt die Autorin einige Punkte, die bei der korrekten Dokumentation von Arztkonsultationen und Patientenakten helfen sollen. Diese Punkte schließen unter anderem die Aufnahme von Röntgenbild-Beschreibungen, eine elaborierte Zusammenfassung des Gesprächsverlaufs, aussagekräftige Momente während der Diskussion sowie unterschriebene Einverständniserklärungen hinsichtlich der geplanten Behandlung mit ein. In einem letzten Schritt präsentiert die Autorin einige formale Kriterien, die zur erfolgreichen und richtigen Dokumentation von Zahnarztkonsultationen beitragen sollen, bevor sie ein abschließendes Fazit formuliert.