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What are some of the key mistakes dentists make with everyday communication with patients?

In my opinion, here are the top three, I am going to generalise here; not all dentists make these mistakes.

Some dentists do not spend enough time building a rapport with the patient. The patient doesn't care how much you know until they know how much you care. The rapport stage is the most crucial part of the consultation, because without it, there is little or no trust. I understand why some dentists don't do this, if they are a NHS dentist as the current system does not allow time to do undertake this properly.

I also find some dentists make the criminal mistake of providing solutions, without truly understanding the goals of their patients. They tend to listen to respond (i.e. just waiting for a gap) as opposed to listening to understand. You can't provide a solution until you fully understand the problem and you will only reach this by asking lots of questions.

The third big one for me is talking too technical. As students you are fresh out of five years of clinical education, so it can be an easy trap to fall into.

The problem with too much technical information is that it can confuse the patient and even put them off taking up your treatment. Joking aside, patients don't really buy a titanium screw surgically screwed into your jawbone under anaesthetic – they will select an implant.

I suggest dentists wear the shoes of the patient and speak to them in a language that they understand, as Dale Carnegie stated in his brilliant book 'How to Win Friends and Influence People', 'see things from the other person's point of view'. Showing videos and presenting some leaflets can often help here.

WHEN ANISH MET ASHLEY

I have often heard that students are clinically ready to head out into the world of dentistry, but when they do so they're bright-eyed and not rounded professionals ready to hit the ground running.

That's not a criticism – far from it. More of an observation from many senior voices within the profession.

One of those areas is a soft skill that takes a lot of hard work – even for seasoned dental professionals. Discussing finances with patients can be difficult, so **Anish Patel** spoke to **Ashley Latter** about how students can be ready to make the leap.

What can young dentists do to help build rapport and meaningful relationships?

Become genuinely interested in your patient. If he or she is a current patient take a few minutes to read the notes before they walk in. Have they been on holiday recently? Keep it in the notes and ask them about it. Regarding a new patient try and get some background information about them from the receptionist prior to the first appointment and use that information in building rapport. Just doing these simple things will help build trust. Trust is the most important part of any relationship.

How can we present treatments in an ethical way to patients?

In short, spend time building rapport and then asking lots of questions, so that you truly understand the patients' visions and goals. Once you have done this and you have summarised back to the patients their goals, you are in a much better position to present the solution on the agenda of your patient. It is imperative that you present your solution(s) in a language that patients understand and buy into. You also must communicate informed consent really well explaining any risks of the treatment.

How can patient objections to treatment plans be overcome?

If you spend enough time building rapport and ask enough questions early on in the appointment you will receive less objections. However, if you do then you must put yourself in your patient's shoes. A big mistake dentists make is that they get defensive, which is completely the wrong approach. You need to demonstrate empathy first and then find out what all of their concerns are by asking questions.

If the patient is concerned about the cost of the treatment, then by asking questions you can truly fully understand their concerns. There are various types of price objections and by asking questions, you can understand what they are. If, for example their concern is cash flow, i.e. paying for the treatment, you can explain that you have a 0% finance package and you can spread the payments over six months, interest-free. If you don't know what the objection is you cannot overcome it and you will only find out by asking.

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Another example could be if the patient wants teeth whitening, however you discover that they are not dentally fit, then you need to share with the patient the reasons why they cannot have the treatment at this stage, informing them what needs to happen before hand, but remaining as positive as you can for the patient.

It is also important to have evidence of your work. Create a photo book online with some before and after shots. Have it on display in the waiting room. Also obtain some video testimonials from previous patients and show them on an iPad. You will of course need permission for the photographs from previous patients but if you have done a good job for them, they will be happy to help.

Is ethical sales really ethical?

Yes, absolutely. Most people's perception of selling is someone trying to convince them to buy something that they do not want. Ethical sales is about connecting with the patient,



➤ Ashley Latter, business coach and owner at Ashley Latter dental sales training

spending time asking questions, not making assumptions, making the patient aware of options and presenting them in a way that interests them. It's about providing solutions to the patient's problems.

Do dentists lack self-esteem when they discuss fees?

Not all dentists do, no. However, I have discovered over the last 25 years training and coaching dentists, discussing fees is a real issue for many.

It is quite understandable. At university, you were taught how to deliver your specialist technical skills in a caring and empathetic manner. Quite rightly you have been trained to be a healthcare professional and not a business person. I understand that discussing fees can be outside of your comfort zone.

I have often found dentists are frightened of the response they will receive from the patient. For example, if in the past a patient said something derogatory, they make assumption that everyone is thinking the same.

As a result, many dentists will reduce their fees because they feel they that more patients will say yes to their plans. This often is a wrong assumption. For example, let's say a dentist who works in the NHS is offering a private option against a NHS one, I have had many dentists tell me that they feel the gap between the two fees is significant. By narrowing the fee of the private option, then they feel more patients will say yes to their private options.

The truth is however, that you have earned the right to charge the fees that you do. You have a skillset that very few people can boast. Don't forget that.

Anish Patel and Ashley Latter ■