The customer is always right?

Anyone with any training in dealing with the public has heard the saying, “The customer is always right.” But does that hold true in the dental office? Every dental professional will recognize this scenario. The patient comes in and tells the clinician what they do want, or more oftentimes, what they do not want done. The request might sound something like, “I know I haven’t been in for a cleaning in a really long time, but I don’t want any X-rays taken today because I can’t afford them.”

Then the patient continues with comments such as: “Don’t spray any water in my mouth,” “my teeth are sensitive to cold so don’t scrape them,” and “don’t polish my teeth, the paste is too gritty.” How is the clinician supposed to respond to patients such as these?

There are two ways to approach this situation. One is for the dental professional to make a case for what “needs” to be done. This begins with the clinician making a case for the necessity for X-rays, water, scraping and polishing. This is followed by the patient reiterating that he doesn’t want any of those things done in a slightly louder and firmer voice.

At this point, the struggle has begun. This scenario will usually end up with one of the individuals being upset over the turn of events, and can even lead to the loss of a patient. Worse, yet, it can lead the patient sharing a less-than-glowing opinion of your practice to other potential patients. The result of this approach may be lose-lose for all parties involved.

What would happen if the clinician would say, “OK” when the patient lays down the ground rules? There is a camp that would say, “Give the customer what they want and keep them happy.” If the patient is happy, would it not be a more enjoyable appointment for all involved?

Taking baby steps to get this patient educated may be the best way to approach this dilemma. The form here is on making the appointment pleasant enough to get the patient to come back for future appointments so progress can be made toward better oral health. This approach may result in a happy patient who is willing to return and a clinician who feels fulfilled because she was able to work with this patient and make progress.

As with all things, there are pros and cons to each scenario. Because there is no clear-cut answer to this predicament, the office needs to have a policy in place about how it will handle such patients. Is the office going to stand firm in its treatment procedures or is the office going to work with patients who present with these challenges?

Once the policy is put into motion, team members know what is expected of them and they are to act accordingly. This will certainly cut down on the drama and complaining these types of patients usually cultivate in the office.

Best Regards,

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References

About the author
Cathy Hes- ter Seckman is a dental hygienist, speaker, writer and index- er. She is a 1974 graduate of West Liberty State College. As a hygienist, she has been in general and specialty practices for 29 years, including three years as a temporary hygienist. Since 2005, she has worked in a pediatric practice. For the past four years, she has presented continuing education programs for hygienists on pediatric management, nutrition, communication and pre- natal to preschool care. She has published nearly 100 articles in dental magazines.