Dentistry is about helping people and you have probably already found that people ask you all sorts of things about their teeth and mouth. This can be difficult if you haven’t studied the subject yet. They may see you as an expert despite your protestations that you are not. No matter what your level of knowledge is, it is important to listen to the person, otherwise we can’t help them. It also helps us. As Sir William Osler said in 1904: ‘Listen to the patient; he is telling you the diagnosis’.

Your amazing brain

Have you wondered why it is so hard to concentrate on what someone is telling you? Why does your mind drift off in lectures and seminars even if they are interesting? It is because you have such a mighty brain (but be careful how you tell the lecturer that if they catch you not concentrating). You can process spoken words at about 400 words a minute, but people speak socially at 110 words per minute, or often slower if they are speaking formally as in a lecture. This means that even when your brain has taken in the visual stimulus of slides or other visual aids you still have a lot of spare capacity. That is how mighty your brain is.

Clear your head

To really listen to a patient you need to clear the other stuff out of your head. This is much easier said than done. You will be wondering what they are thinking about you, what you will be doing with them, and may well be conscious of a colleague working with you who will be watching and listening to you. You may also be mindful of time and the need to get a move on. The good news is that it takes no longer to listen to the patient than it does to ignore them.

You can try to focus not only on what the patient is saying, but also on how they are saying them. As will be shown in a future article, people reveal more about themselves and how they perceive their health or problems in how they speak, than what they actually say. If we can tune into this, we can gain masses of information and keep our brains fully occupied. Often their choice of words and their expression together tell us far more about how they feel than their words alone. If we can get in touch with their feelings, we are in a much better position from which to be able to help them.

The patients give even more information about their feelings and thought processes through their facial expression and body language. We will look at these in more detail in another article, but remember that it is easy for someone to disguise their words to give an impression of self-assurance, but telltale signs of apprehension will usually be readily detectable through voice tone or body language – even to those of us who do not have the little grey cells of Hercule Poirot.

Mike Wanless says that to really hear what your patient is saying, you’ll need to clear your head and look for the signs

Mike Wanless

qualified as a dentist in Manchester in 1977. He took an MSc in health education and a PhD in dentist-patient communication. He has spent most of his career in the community dental service but now works as the Head of the Greater Manchester School for Dental Care Professionals in Salford. He is also a dental tutor for two PCTs and is an examiner for NERJIN.

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