The fear factor

No matter what your role is in the team, you are never isolated from dealing with nervous patients, so should be prepared for this to happen. Sharon Holmes offers some advice

Whether you’re the receptionist, the nurse or the practice manager, learning to spot and understand the signs and symptoms of an anxious patient is probably one of the most important skills you will develop when working in a medical environment.

My working life extends back to when I was 19-years-old and working in a hospital in South Africa, training to become a staff nurse. This was before I changed career direction and went into dentistry. I can recall one incident very clearly involving a patient that was regularly being admitted due to heart failure. She was admitted one Sunday when I happened to be off duty. On Monday, when I arrived on the ward, she told me how happy she was to see me, and continued to tell me how rude she had perceived the other nurses’ reactions towards her. ‘They are always too busy to help me and they won’t speak to me in Afrikaans,’ she said. When I spoke to the other nurses about this, they said they found her rude and demanding.

I learned very early on not to take this personally, but rather to be calm when dealing with patients of this nature. What really matters

This lady was in her seventies and as it turned out, very afraid of dying. Even though my Afrikaans is not as good as I’d like it to be, I managed to use it to talk to her, which in return made her feel wanted, understood and cared for. And that is what really counts. I learned from very early on that fear and anxiety can be misunderstood, with patients of this disposition often labelled rude and demanding. I learned very early not to take this personally, but rather to be calm when dealing with patients of this nature.

My nursing experience made working in the dental surgery a lot easier, mainly because you tend to work much closer to the patient, while assisting the dentist. The patient’s personality would change from appearing ‘rude’ in the waiting room, to ‘really anxious’ in the surgery just before treatment.

Most of the time, first-time patients let you know that they are really anxious, allowing you to openly comfort and reach out to them. Then there are patients that don’t tell you they are afraid, but if you have any form of emotional intelligence as a dental nurse, you should be able to sense when the patient is uncomfortable. This is a skill all nurses should make an effort to develop.

I would make small talk with the patient, and slowly they would open up to me. I used to pay particular attention to their responses and body language to gauge when not to make small talk. Most of the time I was able to develop strong bonds with my patients, to the point when I called in sick, certain patients would cancel their appointments and reschedule.

My dentist found this really amusing, especially as it wasn’t me carrying out the treatment, but him!

Patients have many different reasons for attending the same practice continually. They may not be happy with the whole team, but there is usually one member that makes a difference to them. So it’s not just the dentists that bring patients into a practice – good support staff also bring referrals from patients, which lead to whole families joining the practice.

Support is vital

Ignoring a patient’s anxiety can be detrimental to the patient and tell whoever will listen about the poor experience they’ve had.

In today’s times, the media and the internet play an important role in promoting your practice’s reputation, for example, patients join community websites where they can publish their comments about their dental practice. This is a good way to monitor what your patients think of you, because most won’t tell you what you’re doing wrong, instead they’ll just go somewhere else. No one likes going to the dentist, so we as a dental fraternity have a duty of care to the patients to make their visit as enjoyable as possible. Remember dentists’ patients are also watching you closely and the relationship you have with your staff makes a huge difference to how the patients see you as a person.

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Leaving a patient anxious or difficult, because I know I chose this as my career path and that I am there to meet the needs of my patients. I know that I can make a difference to a patient’s needs by being kind and empathetic. Patients appreciate the care that we give to them. From this knowledge, the practice will automatically benefit without me even trying to make it become a successful and happy practice.

As Barack Obama says: ‘Can we win? Yes we can!’

About the author

Originally from South Africa, Sharon Holmes moved to the UK in 2002. She thoroughly enjoys her position as business development manager at the Dental Arts Studio and her role in the dental industry, which has moulded her into a winner in her field. She believes that her position is based on common sense.