Know your patients

It's important that you get all of the information you need when you meet a patient for the very first time, says Dr Michael Sultan

In dentistry, as in any medical field, it is advantageous to be as well informed about the patient as possible before proceeding with treatment.

The initial communication a practitioner has with their patient is often the most important, as this is the stage where the patient will form their first thoughts about the professional, and decide whether or not they feel comfortable with them. With this in mind, communication should be non-intimidating, open and sensitive, and accommodate active listening and acknowledgement of the patient's concerns.

Dig deep

It is important to gain as much information about the patient as possible before they even get into the chair. This ensures the professional is armed with information on the patient's medical and dental history, any fears or phobias, and the patient's needs and desires for treatment from the very start. This allows the practitioner to offer a more tailored treatment plan, and any additional support, such as sedation or distraction techniques, should be required.

The whole dental team should be involved in the initial communication with a patient. After all, it's not just the practising dentist who is seen! Many patients will be very nervous of a visit to the surgery, so a casual chat with a friendly receptionist, or a conversation with the dental nurse about the upcoming procedure before arriving at the surgery can often help put their minds at ease.

All patients want to deal with people who are empathetic to their situation, so an initial meeting with a team that is warm and friendly is one of the best ways to help relax a nervous patient. One of the key members of staff in this situation is the dental nurse. Ensuring that you have a strong nursing team is very important, as the nurse is the person who will be there to hold the patient's hand and offer reassurance. Nobody can be taught how to offer this kind of support, so ensuring you have a compassionate and personable nursing team definitely makes the dentist's job much simpler!

Address patients' concerns

Good communication before an initial consultation is a good way for patients to air any concerns or fears they have about a procedure. Concerns should never be ignored – acknowledging a patient's anxieties and reassuring them that they are understood, and that you are prepared to tailor a treatment plan to ensure that they feel as comfortable as possible shows compassion.

While the personal approach is vital when a patient is in the surgery, the advent of modern technology has simplified the process of gathering initial information from patients. I have included a section on my website where referring practitioners can provide detailed information about referrals, so by the time a patient enters my surgery, I already have a comprehensive document detailing the patient's previous dental care. This is incredibly useful when putting together treatment plans, however must be followed by a face-to-face conversation during the initial consultation!

A good relationship

If receiving a referral patient, working closely with the referring practitioner is vital – after all, the patient's own dentist knows the most about the patient. Maintaining a good relationship also helps relax the patient, and they feel that the team they are visiting is an extension of their own practice. I often tell patients to imagine that they are visiting a room in their own surgery – everything they know and trust is the same, and I we are simply an extension of their own practitioner's team.

Occasionally you will experience a patient who is reluctant to offer any personal information. I would advise to proceed very carefully in this situation. Personally, I refuse to treat any patient who refuses to provide medical details, as a lack of information in this area can put everyone involved at risk. It is more difficult when discussing less clinical details, as many patients feel that their personal information is not needed to carry out dental treatment.

In many ways, this is the case, however I believe that the more I know about a patient the better the procedure. The relationship between practitioner and patient needs to be one of trust and respect, and I believe that it is very difficult to feel this way about a patient when all you have in your chair is the equivalent of a sheet of medical facts. Of course, knowing your patient's favourite colour is slightly too much detail, but a certain amount of personal information is useful!

For example, if a patient doesn't like the taste of mint, you can accommodate by using an orange-flavoured mouthwash instead – thus making the experience a more pleasurable one! Details like this help ensure that a patient leaves the surgery feeling that they have experienced a good service, and are not likely to be as apprehensive should they have to return.

Communicate clearly

I firmly believe that the relationship between patient and practitioner is one that should be nurtured, and good communication from both is vitally important.

About the author

Dr Michael Sultan BDS MSc FDS is a specialist in Endodontics and the clinical director of EndoCare. Michael qualified at Barts University in 1986. He worked as a general dental practitioner for five years before commencing specialist endodontic courses at Eastman CPD, University of London. He has been in endodontics since 1990 and worked as an endodontist in various practices before setting up in Harley St, London in 2000. He was admitted onto the specialist register in endodontics in 1999 and has lectured extensively to postgraduate dental groups as well as lecturing on Endodontic courses at Eastman CPD, University of London. He has been involved with numerous dental groups and has been chairman of the Alpha Institute for four years. In 2002, he became clinical director of EndoCare a group of specialist practitioners. To talk to a member of the EndoCare team call 020 7224 0099 or email reception@endo- care.org.uk or for more information please visit www.endocare.co.uk.