Dentists must learn variety of people skills

It is evident from the amount of literature on challenging patients and delivering bad news that not all the problems have been solved, and that these consultations continue to be difficult for most dentists.

As there is significant variability in what patients desire for their bad news consultation, and in what strategies work for individual challenging patients, dentists need a wide repertoire of helpful skills.

Finally, it is clear that ongoing specialised skills training is required to continually refine skills in managing these challenging consultations.

With the apparent increase in violence against health professionals, or at least increased awareness of this issue, it is likely that complaint resolution will have a more positive reinforcement for both the staff and patients involved.

Assessing the reasonableness of the provider’s actions requires full understanding of the context within which these situations occur. It is important also that we are informed about the factors that influence decision-making in these situations and can critically assess the responses.

While recognising the fundamental importance of access to treatment, we must also be cognisant of the personal strain placed on the dentist, the staff at the front desk, and the financial consequences of treating violent or abusive patients.

There is also a need for the clinician to examine the circumstances that may have contributed to a patient’s behaviour, including medical, mental and other factors. Intervention or other strategies should be considered that provide realistic solutions and options for both patients and staff and, if at all possible, reduce the potential for harm to either party. All effort should be made to prevent the escalation of issues to such a level that denial of treatment is the only solution.

While both patients and our staff may have recourse to legal remedies, a range of other options, aimed at strengthening and continuing the treating relationship, also exist. Officers that have discussed and prepared for these situations, with trained professionals, will be confident in the use of these strategies and better equipped to respond to violent or abusive incidents, when they occur.

It is never pleasant to refuse to treat a prospective patient. However, if you see a problem coming, it is easier to avoid getting involved with that patient than it is to get out of a doctor-patient relationship. Once you detect that you are dealing with a prospective patient, you must balance the risk of continuing to treat that patient against the potential problems you will encounter with that treatment. Problem patients are not only a headache to treat, but they can also subject you to liability. As I stated earlier, that looking back and reflecting on my own years of clinical practice, my heart always told me that patients were inherently good. My experience however often provided evidence to the contrary and taught me to practice defensively!

In his powerful book, which remained on The New York Times best-seller list for more than five years, Don Miguel’s ‘The Four Agreements’ teaches us:

- Always be impeccable with your word.
- Don’t take anything personally.
- Don’t make assumptions.
- Always do your best.

With these thoughts, each one of us can certainly help ourselves to avoid and steer clear of bringing on more problems upon our shoulders than we need. Translated, this means... take enough time to evaluate a prospective patient, try to consider treating and dealing with them for the next two or three years before accepting them into your practice. This will be well worth your time and effort and will be one of the keys to your future success.

Please feel free to write in and share your thoughts, or secrets, for defusing hostility, coaxing compliance, and allaying anxiety in our patient relationships.

References:
9. Scharlkh Rehman, MD, FACEP, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center/University of South Carolina, Charleston.