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Practice Management 15

Dentists must learn variety of people skills

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

As there is significant vari-
ability in what patients desire for their bad news consultation, and in what strategies work for indi-
vidually challenging patients, den-
tists need a wide repertoire of helpful skills.

Finally, it is clear that ongoing spe-
cialised skills training is re-
quired to continually refine skills in managing these challenging consultations.

With the apparent increase in violence against health profes-
sionals, or at least increased awareness of this issue, it is likely that complaint resolution will have a proactive reinforcing role for both the staff and pa-
tients involved.

Assessing the reasonable-
ness of the provider’s actions re-
quires full understanding of the con-
text within which these situ-
ations occur. It is important also that we are informed about the factors that influence decision-
making in these situations and can critically assess the re-
sponses.

While recognising the funda-
mental importance of access to treatment, we must also be cog-
nisant 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 circum-
stances that may have con-
tributed to a patient’s behavior, including medical, mental and other factors. Intervention or other strategies should be con-
sidered that provide realistic so-
lutions and options for both pa-
tients and staff, and if at all possi-
ble, 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 op-
tions, aimed at strengthening and continuing the treating rela-
tionship, 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 vio-
 lent 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 get-
ing involved with that patient than it is to get out of a doctor-
patient relationship. Once you

detect that you are dealing with a patient who is, you must balance the risk of continuing to treat that patient against the potential problems you will en-
counter 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 al-
ways told me that patients were inherently good. My experi-
ence however often provided evidence to the contrary and taught me to practice defen-
sively.

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:

1. Be impeccable with your word.
2. Don’t make assumptions.
3. Always do your best.

With these thoughts, each one of us can certainly help ourselves to avoid and steer clear of bring-
ing on more problems upon our shoulders than we need. Trans-
lated, this means... take enough time to evaluate a prospective pa-
tient, try to consider treating and dealing with them for the next two or three years before accept-
ing 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.

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