In general practice we can often feel we don't have time to listen to our patients. And can we really be bothered anyway? I mean, they do go on a bit don't they? And yet, if we don't listen actively we run the risk of missing out on treatment and by default money. Yes, I said it, listening can make you money! Listening well can help you to identify the patient's wants and needs and work these into the treatment options you offer them. And it can't just be one team member that does this. For optimum results it needs to be the whole team.

Here are some simple tips that can get you listening actively quickly and simply.

Shut up!
No really, ask a question and then do not talk again until you are absolutely sure the other person is finished talking. It is amazing the extra insight you will gain by trying this. When we interrupt two things may happen. They will either perseverate and talk for a long time because of it, or they will clam up altogether.

Ask permission
When you want to discuss something with a patient, stopping smoking, changing diet, adding a new oral hygiene product to their routine, ask permission to start the conversation. Rarely the patient will say no. When they do, respect that. It is so hard to do but DON'T talk to them anyway. They will see the respect you gave their wishes and be much more receptive to you as a person, and in the long run, your advice.

Take note
A great way to show you are listening well is to write down what the patient is saying. It doesn't have to be word for word but writing in their choice of words then repeating these back to them can really show the patient has been heard and understood. All of us, regardless of background or circumstances, value being listened to and understood.

Make a questionnaire with open questions on it
To help the whole team get into the swing of active listening make your questionnaire have open questions in it instead of closed. An open question requires more than a yes or no answer. For example: What was it that made you decide to book for your visit today? Open questions can help lead the pa-
That way you can compare how you communicate and listen now with the listening you will develop as a habit over time. The results should be pretty conclusive that this is the best way to work with patients for their patient centred care pathway.

Build it up one patient at a time per day over a week or so, then look back and reflect on the benefits as well as measuring which listening sessions went best.

We are all individuals so learning a way of doing this that works for you is important too.

Good luck and remember - we have two ears and only one mouth for a reason.

The art of listening

Mhari Coxon discusses how using your ears can lead to success

‘To help the whole team get into the swing of active listening make your questionnaires have open questions’

Re-read those notes

It is not easy to remember each patient so always take a minute to re-read your notes. Remembering that their son was doing his driving test, that they hate the sound of the slow speed, dread the 3in1; these little touches mean so much to your patients and will keep them coming back.

Share – unless asked not to

Share the information received with all the team so there can be continuity in conversations with the patients. Obviously, if the patient tells you something in confidence and asks you not to share this again respect their wishes. The only time this does not stand is if the information could pose a risk to others.

Try it out a bit at a time

Learning any new skill can be tiring, and can make us run late! So, try out listening in this way to one patient in your morning list, then on one patient from your afternoon list.

About the author

Mhari Coxon has 20 years experience in dentistry, working as a nurse, receptionist, oral health advisor and ultimately hygienist in a variety of practice environments. She is passionate about her profession. At present, she works as Senior Professional Relations Manager for Philips Oral Healthcare and clinically as a hygienist in central London. From Chairing the London BSDHT for 5 years, and working as an MD, Mhari excels at maintaining and co-ordinating a team and utilising skills, decentralising leadership and developing self efficacy in members. Throughout her career Mhari has developed hygiene protocols and plans in practices which have contributed to the team success. Mhari is Clinical Director for CPTherOCP Ltd, a training company offering motivational and interactive development courses to the dental team. A keen writer, Mhari is on the Publications Committee of Dental Health, the British Society of Hygienists and Therapists (BSDHT) Journal, has a conversational column in Dental Tribune and writes articles for many other publications and online sites. As a speaker Mhari has presented regionally, nationally and internationally for many groups including Talking Points in Dentistry, the British Orthodontic Society Specialist group, the BSDHT, the UKSF, the International Symposium of Dental Hygiene, the dentistry shows and many others. In 2006 she was the Pride Awards hygienist of the year, and was highly commended in 2010. 2011 saw her placed 15 in the Dentistry Top 50 most influential people in the UK.

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