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 persevere 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 down the patient's 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-
The art of listening
Mhari Coxon discusses how using your ears can lead to success

In general practice we can then look back and reflect on time per day over a week or so, build it up one patient at a time. The results should be pretty conclusive that this is the best way to work with patients for their patient-centred care pathway.

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 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.

Mhari Coxon

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 3 years, and working as an MD, Mhari excels at managing 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 continued to be used with great success. Mhari is Clinical Director for CPDforDCP 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, for ADA, the International Symposium of Dental Hygiene, the dentistry shows and many others. In 2006 she won the Pro)tege Award, hygienist of the year, and was highly commended in 2010. 2012 saw her placed 15 in the Dentistry Top 50 most influential people in the UK.

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