How often do you recognise a scenario like this - a patient has come to see you for the first time and the first comment he/she makes is: “I hate dentists ... Sorry nothing personal...I don’t like dentists. ” It is like going to your local Chinese take away and then telling them – “I hate Chinese...”

Now as a dentist how do you react to a comment like this?

There could be a few possible reactions to this by you as a dentist: one could be just to ignore what the patient has just said and to carry on with the usual initial greeting with a grin; or to get slightly irritated (or more than slightly - depending on the stress level of that day!) and state something in the line of: “Oh don’t worry, you’ll be fine. You haven’t seen me before and it is always worrying to see someone new for the first time” etc etc. (Or maybe, like me, you almost feel tempted to tell them vice versa: “The feelings are mutual, I also hate the patients who hate the dentists - nothing personal…”) The ideal way to deal with this is of course to pause at that point, to allow more time with this apparent hateful/nervous individual and briefly find out what happened in the past for the patient to comment like this.

In this current climate of massive commercialisation of dentistry, with all its branches of aesthetic and perfect smiles, whiter than the whitest teeth and even spreading out to Botox, derma fillers and chemical peels, it feels it’s time to hold on for a second, take a step back and go back to the core of basic dentistry, where there is still an unacceptable number of people out there who are irrationally hateful toward dentists. We should try to address the predicament head on, attempt to crack it through the middle by asking what the reason behind the resentful comments and endeavour to re-programme the traumatic past experience.

Unfortunately in this eccentric era of earning more mentally pushes us to spend less and less time to have chat with people like this. We are apparently too busy with these flashy materialistic designer smiles and meaningless white teeth to take a utilitarian approach on bringing on the real spontaneous smile, which is white in its truest sense.

However, to deal with these nervous patients we jump into the easy solution of referral to hospitals for sedations, hypnosis or possible general anaesthesia to come to our rescue, exhaust the resources of our already overstretched NHS facilities. We tend to forget that there are occasions where patients rather appreciate the simple good old empathy instead of a quick assessment and swift referral.

To gain back the trust and confidence of the nervous patients it may be wise to do the minimum; do what the patient wishes instead of what is the most important thing to be done in the mouth at that stage; once the concept of seeing a non-hateful dentist is achieved the rest will follow quickly.

Turning a nervous person to a regular attendant could provide you with a deep sense of pleasure, knowing that you have an unshakable patient who doesn’t hate you anymore. Nothing personal though...

A profession patients love to hate

Ashequr Rahman discusses ways to deal with patient perceptions

About the author

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