Workplace communication skills are quite possibly the most written about interpersonal skill. The reason for this being that peoples’ sense of wellbeing is directly linked to the quality of their communication with their colleagues. Many dental professionals recognise that top-down communication in dental teams frequently leaves a lot to be desired. In some cases this is due to the fact that implicit rules that have evolved over many years which set the tone of workplace communications. Since the introduction of care quality standards, there is a requirement for practices to develop explicit communication protocols characterised by clearly defined policies, procedures and protocols. The objective of these protocols is to provide a communication framework that will ultimately equip dental teams to provide the highest possible standard of dental care to patients. An important part of patient care is ensuring that patients have positive experiences every time they contact the practice. These positive experiences in face-to-face interactions can stem from the warmth and friendliness shown by team and on a more formal basis the language and protocols used in written communications. Most practices have established guidelines in place for face-to-face interactions, however many still need to put into place protocols and procedures to govern the tone of the written word in the following formats; letters, notices and reports. Written communications can be effective communication channels, as long as they are constructed correctly and abide by the following guidelines:

Letters
Letters to patients should have a businesslike but amiable tone. They should be concise and factually accurate. All references and details in the content of the letter should be checked and correspondence proof read before being sent out, as errors can cause confusion. Attention must be paid to the correct use of grammar, punctuation and paragraphs, with avoidance of the use of abbreviations, jargon, or colloquial language. Letters must be signed by the appropriate person eg a report will be signed by the dentist as verification of the information within. But a less formal letter to a patient can be signed by an administrator.

Presentation
Letters must be produced on practice stationery. The layout...
must be reader friendly and attractive using the house style and font. Correspondence with patients will include new patient letters to introduce the practice; these letters provide important opportunities to set the tone of the relationship between the practice and the patients.

In most cases template letters will be made available ready to be personalised for use. Templates should be signed off by the practice management and in a format that prevents errors in adding personalised content. In some cases styles and formats could be used to appeal to patients based on their age or demographic.

Emails
Whereas the etiquette for letter writing is generally understood, this is not the case for email etiquette. In many cases these days email is the preferred method of communication. They are fast and effective, but to ensure they project the correct image of the practice, guidelines should be in place, since emails sent out from the practice reflect upon its friendliness and professionalism. Therefore measures should be put in place to ensure that the language used is polite, courteous, and appropriate. Stringent measure should be taken to ensure confidentiality is maintained and your computer equipment is virus guarded.

Practice protocols should be agreed about checking for incoming emails and about the required speed of response. Practices should ensure their email is set up correctly. It should identify the sender, display the subject matter in the 'subject' bar and signatures should provide the information legally required for business emails.

The patient experience is built up on many levels. Most dental teams understand the influence of face to face communications. If they can raise the standard of their written communication skills up to the level of their face to face communications, dental teams will make progress in building lasting respectful relationships with their patients.

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Communication through letters can set the tone between patients and practice.

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