Don’t take complaints lightly

Dilhani Silva talks complaints

Andrew Mitchell's resignation from his Chief Whip post and my colleague attending a course on complaints handling prompted me to write this. We live in a world where we are regulated by so many authorities, and more importantly we live in a media led world. Escalated complaints can cost you your job, five years of education, your reputation, and your life for that matter.

On a personal note complaints rise due to lack of communication skills and The Dental Defence Union is advising dental professionals to brush up their communication skills to help avoid complaints. Responding to news from the Dental Complaints Service (DCS) that complaints about private dental treatment rose by 17 per cent in the year to April 2012, the Dental Defence Union (DDU) says that in its experience, many complaints involve communication problems of one sort or another.

There is an old saying that if you can talk properly you can get away with anything, even murder. We live in a multi-cultural society; English is not our mother tongue. In my experience, different cultures express themselves differently.

The heart of the dental clinic is the receptionist; she is the ambassador who carries the surgery. She could be the most glamorous and attractive receptionist but lack of communication skills can send the surgery downhill. As a receptionist it is important to give clear and precise answers on the phone, and to maintain a neutral tone of voice is of paramount importance.

Confidence

Of course the dentist has to maintain effective communication skills to treat patients. Some people may believe that only manual dexterity is needed to do the treatment. I completely disagree as the patient should have confidence and total trust in their dentists. In order to gain their trust the dentist should be able to convey the treatment plan. To be able to have a decent conversation is not enough, are you giving treatment options, answering their questions without jargon when they raise concerns, and willing to apologise when things go wrong? Patient satisfaction is more important in this day and age than ever.

Many practises have a treatment coordinator today. It is a very good way of giving the patient tremendous experience through the patient journey at the surgery, and it also saves time for the dentist to do more clinical work on the patient. The patient feels they are being given a personalised service and that they are being given a bespoke approach.

The surgery can avoid complaints by providing clear and concise treatment plans and financial options. Also, the whole dental team should speak from the same page; the patient should always feel that they are being treated by the best team, from the receptionist to the dental nurse and dentist. Having eye contact when you talk is very important; I have a pet peeve about people closing their eyes even when they sing ‘alone when they talk!’

Happy ending

The successful conversations will always lead to a happy ending. Sharing meaningful and practical information with patients will educate patients. It is our duty to educate and explain things in a more layman’s term and what is in their best interest. Listen to the patient’s needs and the patient can be confident that their treatment is being provided by a fully competent professional, or is transferred or referred to one to do so.

Take responsibility and do not take complaints lightly. Discuss issues at staff meetings and learn from mistakes. Educate staff members and improve communication skills. Communication cannot be taught from a book; it is your attitude, which can be changed by correct planning and control. Body language also plays a key role in communication; let us not forget that actions speak louder than words.

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