Patient motivation techniques

When it comes to motivating patients to maintain good oral hygiene practices, a clear plan is essential given the time constraints of most dental appointments. What this plan entails, however, depends on what the most pressing issues to the patient are. prevention magazine spoke with Sandy Basheda, a dental hygienist at the M & N Dental Practice in Bedford in the UK, about how she structures her oral hygiene appointments and the importance of building relationships with patients.

Ms Basheda, how did you first get started as a dental hygienist at M & N Dental Practice?

Sandy Basheda: I’ve been working at M & N Dental Practice for three years now. I started basically straight after I graduated from the University of Liverpool with a degree in dental hygiene and therapy. Prior to that, I had a background in dental nursing, but I wanted more of an instrumental role with dental patients, which led me to hygiene and therapy.

What does your average day at work involve, and what is the structure of your oral hygiene appointments?

I see many patients with periodontal problems and so conduct a lot more hygiene right now than therapy. I also deal with a lot of children that, unfortunately, have dental caries due to a poor diet, lack of oral hygiene and likely a lack of education on how to prevent it. It’s not a good start for children if they have to have fillings put in or even have their teeth pulled if it’s particularly bad—it doesn’t give them a good first impression of the dentist.

Each oral hygiene appointment is scheduled for half an hour and begins with a discussion about the patient’s existing problems and current oral hygiene routine. I then explain to the patient what the purpose of the appointment is and what it will entail and conduct an assessment of his or her oral health. Every patient is very different, and it really depends on what he or she needs addressed as to how the appointment will proceed from there.

How can you get patients to continue with good oral hygiene practices after an appointment?

I think one has to build a relationship with them. They have to trust one and understand what the benefits of oral hygiene are, as they might not be aware that they have any problems in the first place. For example, if smokers aren’t experiencing any bleeding in their mouths, they might not think that there’s anything to worry about. One needs to be able to explain to them in a clear and understandable way why taking care of their teeth is important not just for their oral health but their overall health too.

But is it possible to achieve this all within half an hour?

Well, it’s not a lot of time, but we can always schedule an hour-long appointment if it is necessary. I see many anxious patients, patients who might not have been to the dentist in ten to 15 years. With these patients, a shorter appointment is often good in the beginning, because it means that they’re not overwhelmed and that one can build up from there over the ensuing sessions. By the second or third appointment, they’re a bit more relaxed and eager for treatment.

How do you motivate your patients to take charge of their own oral hygiene?

I think it’s mostly about re-educating patients on what the correct and most effective cleaning methods are, what products are best for them. It’s about finding something that works for the patient, something that will get him or her excited about taking care of his or her teeth and seeing the benefits. In dentistry, it can be difficult to engage in a cooperative relationship with one’s patients—often, it’s a one-way conversation with the professional giving the patient instructions or advice on how to take care of him- or herself. I like to leave that sort of instructional conversation to the beginning or the end of the appointment, as this allows the patient to think, while in the chair, whether he or she has any questions about anything I’ve said or what our future appointments will entail. Being able to answer these questions in a clear and understandable way is essential to motivating patients.

Thank you very much for the interview.