

VIEW FROM THE PRACTICE

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Rahul Doshi builds on his feature from last month's PPD by explaining how to overcome the obstacles in communicating with patients and gaining treatment acceptance

Last month I spoke about effective communication systems within a practice that allowed patients to fully understand your advice, leading to full acceptance of your treatment advice and plans of action. However, there can be certain barriers to these systems that can lead to a breakdown in communication, so it is important to highlight these aspects of your practice in order to correct them and ultimately prevent loss of patients.

BARRIERS

- **Verbal skills.** Correct use of language can often help immensely during patient discussion. Conversation should be steered towards a positive and beneficial focus. It should also be more relevant to the specific individual rather than generic information.
- **Non-verbal communication.** Often the team is so focused on delivery of information that they forget that subtle body language or the tone of their voice also has an impact on the conversation. Also, if a team member happens to be very busy with practice work when also speaking to a patient, then their facial expression or tone of voice can portray an unwelcome situation. Research has shown that the majority of communication is actually non-verbal. Being mindful of body language can especially help with first impressions.
- **Ambiguous conversation.** Ambiguous or vague words and phrases often create unnecessary confusion for patients. This extends the length of the appointment and

also delays the next appointment. Patients often then leave the conversation with 'I'll think about it'. This should translate as: 'I don't understand, so I need to stop thinking about it'. Also, most people prefer to have a clear message in the conversation and minimal use of 'big words'.

- **Psychological barriers.** Every person is different and often has a unique set of circumstances, so all patients should also be managed in a unique and special way. Patients will feel accommodated as a result and hence be more inclined to stay with you.
- **Environmental inhibitors.** If your practice is providing premium dentistry then it should also look like it provides premium dentistry. Mixed messages arising from a plain or deteriorating practice environment, yet charging premium fees, can often lead to confusion or annoyance, and failure in treatment acceptance.
- **Business communication.** This is important in establishing the correct perception and philosophy of your practice. It requires a unified message in all your correspondence with your patients. Another way of seeing this is your 'brand' communication. This helps patients to decipher their expectations and also understand how you can help them.
- **System failures.** This can be where there has been a deterioration in organisational structure and team members become unclear and confused about who to communicate various messages to and when. It can also be due to failures in creating stepwise systems that allow for better team training in practice protocols. Patients perceive such behaviours as the practice being uncaring since their messages have not been shared.
- **Incorrect attitude.** These barriers result from poor team cooperation within the practice. This often leads to uncaring or



extemporary behaviours that are often not taken well by patients. The patient then feels uncomfortable and unheard. Enhanced teamwork in patient management can often be the key to advice acceptance.

CONCLUSION

All communications, intentional or unintentional has a serious effect on your practice. Unfortunately for us, communication inhibitors envelop every aspect of this service industry and it is an area that requires considerable attention. Effective communication is simply delivering a message in a way that has been understood clearly. This occurs over the telephone, in your examination appointments, during presentation of your advice and in all follow-up correspondence. In fact, effective communication is the bedrock of your dental business for both your team and patients.

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