



CNA HealthPro

Using Technology to Enhance Communication

Dentists are increasingly taking advantage of high-tech tools such as patient education systems, intraoral cameras and computer imaging systems to explain their diagnoses and treatment recommendations in a more graphic, compelling and efficient way. While these devices can often demonstrate certain conditions and objectives that spoken and written descriptions cannot, they are not a substitute for dialogue, documentation and informed consent.

Virtually every dentist can benefit from the improved communication afforded by technology, as so many options are available. Whether in DVD, CD-ROM or videotape format, patient education systems explain complex treatments using graphics and layman's language. The systems' standardized presentations ensure that patients receive important facts about the treatment, which can reduce your risk of an informed consent or informed refusal claim. The graphic demonstrations of the procedure can be very useful when language barriers hinder your ability to communicate. Many dentists report these systems improve practice efficiency by preemptively answering patients' most frequently asked questions.

The use of an intraoral camera is another way to give patients a better understanding of their dental needs. When patients can actually see the problem, it becomes more real to them. This in turn fosters better questions, greater involvement in setting treatment goals, and better treatment decisions. In general, patients are more willing to accept treatment recommendations after viewing the affected tooth through a camera.

Many systems have taken intraoral imaging a step further by permitting computerized modification of the image. These systems give patients an idea of how they'll look after treatment. By generating a clear treatment objective, computer imaging can reduce disagreements and possible claims due to a patient's unrealistic expectations – a fairly common problem in aesthetic dentistry.

When managed properly, technology can benefit the dentist-patient relationship in a number of ways. However, it's not without its drawbacks. Here are some suggestions for avoiding possible technology-based communication pitfalls:

Create realistic expectations. Do not promise certain treatment outcomes or show unattainable predictive images that cannot be achieved in the patient's mouth. Emphasize that a computer enhanced mock-up of a new and improved smile is not a guarantee of how the finished case will look. Even your on-hold messaging can create patient expectations that may be difficult to satisfy.

Don't contradict yourself. Always preview patient education materials before showing them to patients, making sure the information and recommendations are consistent with your own perspectives and protocols. This applies to printed brochures as well as technology-based formats such as DVDs, videos, CD-ROMs and websites. If your protocols differ from those presented to the patient, your patient will struggle to determine the "correct" way unless you take the time to explain the differences.

Augment "canned" messages with two-way communication. It is all too easy assume a patient will understand everything in the educational presentation. The dentist must initiate active communication by reviewing important information and encouraging questions.

Obtain the patient's informed consent. Electronic patient education is an excellent tool in the informed consent process as an adjunct to written consent forms and verbal communication. Prepared DVDs, videos, CD-ROMs, intraoral imaging and staff presentations can all be used to inform patients about the proposed procedure. Regardless of how patients are educated about the benefits, alternatives, and risks of treatment, it is still up to the dentist to obtain the patient's informed consent. Educational materials are not a substitute for your soliciting patient questions, answering those questions, and verifying that patients fully understand the benefits, alternatives, and risks of treatment as well as the potential consequences of not following your recommendations.

Document patient behavior. Record in the patient record whenever a patient views a DVD, video, CD, or intraoral video survey. Document any concerns expressed afterward, as well as questions asked and your answers.

Used carefully, these technology based communication tools can improve communication and efficiency in your practice without increasing liability risks. The challenge is to find the right balance between technology and personal touch.

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