



## CNA HealthPro

### Anyone Can Learn to Communicate Better

Communication is a vital element in every successful dental practice, fostering the relationships that tie patients and dental practices together. Dental communication issues pervade risk management and include contact between dentist and patient, dentist and staff, staff and patient, and between dentists. By properly managing these issues, you can improve patient care and increase patient satisfaction levels – and also help reduce the risk of a malpractice claim arising from a communication breakdown.

The key to effective communication lies in the ability to clearly send and receive oral, nonverbal and written messages. Unfortunately, intended messages are frequently blocked, overlooked, misunderstood, or quickly forgotten. In fact, researchers have found that, on average, people retain 83 percent of what they see but only 11 percent of what they hear! Thus, patients given only spoken post-operative instructions frequently remember little. Written post-op instruction forms significantly enhance both retention and compliance.

Not only are valid messages often ignored, but misleading signals may be conveyed. Dentists and staff should be keenly aware of all the messages they send, as we can never retract what we have communicated. Once the message has been sent and received, it cannot be erased.

Since few patients are dental experts, their satisfaction depends to some extent on your practice's ability to communicate. And research has shown that patients who feel they have a good doctor-patient relationship are less likely to institute malpractice claims.

Both you and your patients can benefit from good communication. When you communicate clearly and effectively with patients, they tend to be more compliant, less fearful, more satisfied with their dentist-patient relationship and more likely to refer others.

#### Oral Communication Skills

Interpersonal skills do not come naturally to all health care professionals. Fortunately, good communication skills can be learned at any age through education and practice. These skills include

- empathy
- active listening
- nonverbal communication (such as gestures and posture)
- questioning and paraphrasing

*Empathy.* Empathy is the ability to see things from another person's perspective. Without empathy, only superficial, impersonal communication can occur.

We can empathize with a patient only if we care about him or her as a person. Communicating empathetically means conveying an accurate understanding of how the other person feels. It involves setting aside personal judgment and accepting the patient's emotional reality.

*Active listening.* Listening is much more than just hearing – it occurs when we give meaning to what we hear. It involves overcoming such barriers as interruptions, impatience and boredom.

As best you can, tune out distractions around you and let your patient speak without interruption. Listen for the feelings behind the facts, without judging what is said or reacting defensively. This is especially important when the patient appears to be critical of you or your practice. At these times, it is essential to control your emotions and address the patient’s concerns professionally and objectively.

*Nonverbal communication.* Your posture signals your level of interest and attention. Face your patient squarely, uncross your arms and legs, and make solid eye contact with your patient. Avoid fidgeting or other signs of impatience.

*Questioning and paraphrasing.* Patients are not always the best historians and need appropriate questioning to bring to light important information about their medical history, prior care and clinical complaints. The type of question you ask will vary depending upon the situation. However, the goal of your questioning should always be to ensure the accuracy of information provided by the patient.

Use open-ended questions at initial appointments and whenever you want to find out what the patient knows, feels or thinks is important. Such questions take time to answer fully, but they allow the patient to reveal more information and engage in a dialogue with you. Open-ended questions include

- “What brings you in to see us?”
- “Tell me about that tooth of yours”
- “What are your goals for your dental health?”

Comments such as “I see” and “please go on,” coupled with gestures such as nodding your head in acknowledgement, encourage the patient to continue. Sometimes, more direct questioning may be needed, such as

- “How do you wish to be addressed by our practice?”
- “On a scale of 1 to 10, how much does it hurt?”
- “When did you first notice the swelling?”

The answers to your questions are an important part of the patient’s encounter and should be recorded in the patient’s chart.

Do not be critical in your questioning – that will often stop the patient cold. Rather than admonishing patients, ask them to explain their feelings or point of view. Speak with a sincere, straightforward tone of voice, not one that could be interpreted as sarcastic, condescending, or remote.

Occasionally, a patient’s response will be so lengthy and convoluted that it may be difficult to digest all that was said. To narrow the focus of the discussion, paraphrase the patient’s remarks. Paraphrasing involves stating in your own words what you think the speaker meant. When paraphrasing, acknowledge the patient’s point of view. Some phrases commonly used to clarify information through paraphrasing are

- “I hear you saying that...”
- “If I understand you correctly...”
- “Correct me if I’m wrong, but...”

The patient will either confirm or further clarify the message you have paraphrased.

Everyone wants to be clearly understood when speaking. In order to convey your messages more clearly, consider the following strategies:

- Assess every patient's hearing level and English comprehension.
- Keep all background noise (such as radio broadcasts) very low.
- Maintain steady eye contact with the patient.
- Look for nods of assent or understanding before moving to the next point.
- Use short, easy-to-understand words (without being patronizing).
- Avoid dental jargon and define technical terms when necessary.
- Present only a few main ideas.
- Speak of facts and certainties first, then move on to more speculative matters.

### **Follow-up Communication**

Proper follow-up communication enhances patient care by identifying clinical problems and addressing patient concerns and complaints quickly. It is also a tremendous practice-builder. Patients look for genuine concern from their health care professionals, and there is no better way to show it than to contact patients after their appointments to see how they are doing.

In addition, procedure-specific post-operative information forms are an excellent risk management tool. Ask yourself how often you have completed a procedure and explained possible post-op sequelae, then finished by saying to the patient, "Just call me if you have any problems."

When you do this, you are asking the patient, who lacks dental training, to recognize post-op problems. Patients may not share a dentist's opinion of what constitutes "too much bleeding," a "very bad taste" or a "too-high bite." Many dentists have had patients return with a draining post-op infection only to tell them, "It didn't hurt, so I didn't think it was a problem."

A well-designed post-op form explains to patients how to recognize an abnormal post-op course. Hand your patient the appropriate form at the end of the appointment and orally review the most important points. A well-informed patient will be more apt to comply with your recommendations and less likely to call you with non-emergent questions.

### **Written Communication**

Your writing ability is as important as your interpersonal skills. Many occasions arise that require your office to send a letter. Misspellings, poor syntax and punctuation errors detract from your message and can diminish the recipient's opinion of you.

Keep in mind that written communications, like spoken words, convey a certain tone. Be professional, nonaccusatory and empathetic in your correspondence. Remember that a poor choice of words could come back to haunt you. Numerous claims have been instigated by an inflammatory letter sent to a patient. Think about how your words might be taken by an irritated or hypersensitive reader. Carefully read and re-read all correspondence before it leaves your office to be certain your words are respectful and unambiguous.

Good communication practices build rapport and leave a lasting impression. Strive to

- Gather information in a professional and cordial manner
- Convey information so that it's understood and retained
- Be understanding of your patients' perspectives

Communication skills are more than a frill – they are an essential risk management measure and a key to effective, high-quality dentistry. As with clinical skills, they must be developed and refined through training, practice and constant self-assessment. Use good communication to establish dentist-patient relationships that endure over time and minimize the chance of a communication breakdown.

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