Know your patients

It’s important that you get all of the information you need when you meet a patient for the very first time, says Dr Michael Sultan

I n dentistry, as in any medi-cal field, it is advantageous to be as well informed about the patient as possible before proceeding with treatment.

The initial communica-tion a practitioner has with their patient is often the most important, as this is the stage that the patient will form their first thoughts about the profes-sional, and decide whether or not they feel comfortable with them. With this in mind, com-munication should be non-in-timidating, open and sensitive, and acknowledge ment of the patient’s concerns.

Dig deep

It is important to gain as much information about the patient as possible before they even get into the chair. This ensures the professional is armed with in-formation on the patient’s medi-cal and dental history, any fears or phobias, and the patient’s needs and desires for treatment from the very start. This allows the practitioner to offer a more tailored treatment plan, and any additional support, such as se-dation or distraction techniques, should be required.

The whole dental team should be involved in the initial communication with a patient. After all, it’s not just the practising dentist who is seen! Many patients will be very nervous of a visit to the surgery, so a casual chat with a friendly receptionist, or a conversation with the dental nurse about the upcoming procedure before arriving at the surgery can often help put their minds at ease.

All patients want to deal with people who are empathetic to their situation, so an initial meeting with a team that is warm and friendly is one of the best ways to help relax a nerv-ous patient. One of the key mem-bers of staff in this situation is the dental nurse. Ensuring that you have a strong nursing team is very important, as the nurse is the person who will be there to hold the patient’s hand and offer reassurance. Nobody can be taught how to offer this kind of support, so ensuring you have a compassionate and personable nursing team defi-nitely makes the dentist’s job much simpler!

Address patients’ concerns

Good communication before an appointment is useful for patients to air any concerns or fears they have about a proced-ure. Concerns should never be ignored – acknowledging a pa-tient’s anxieties and reassuring them that they are understood, and that you are prepared to tailor a treatment plan to ensure that they feel as comfortable as possible shows compassion.

While the personal approach is vital when a patient is in the surgery, the advent of modern technology has simplified the process of gathering initial in-formation from patients. I have included a section on my web-site where referring practition-ers can provide detailed infor-mation about referrals, so by the time a patient enters my surgery, I already have a comprehensive document detailing the patient’s previous dental care. This is incredibly useful when putting together treatment plans, how-ever must be followed by a face-to-face conversation during the initial consultation!

A good relationship

If receiving a referral patient, working closely with the referring practitioner is vital – after all, the patient’s own dentist knows the most about the pa-tient. Maintaining a good rela-tionship also helps relax the pa-tient, and they feel that the team they are visiting is an extension of their own practice. I often tell patients to imagine that my team and I are just another room in their own surgery – everything they know and trust is the same, and I we are simply an extension of their own prac-titioner’s team.

Occasionally you will experi-ence a patient who is reluctant to offer any personal informa-tion. I would advise to proceed very carefully in this situation. Personally, I refuse to treat any patient who refuses to provide medical details, as a lack of in-

formation in this area can put everyone involved at risk. It is more difficult when discussing less clinical details, as many pa-tients feel that their personal in-formation is not needed to carry out dental treatment.

In many ways, this is the case, however I believe that the more I know about a patient the better the procedure. The rela-tionship between practitioner and patient needs to be one of trust and respect, and I believe that it is very difficult to feel this way about a patient when all you have in your chair is the equivalent of a sheet of medi-cal facts. Of course, knowing your patient’s favourite colour is slightly too much detail, but a certain amount of personal in-formation is useful!

For example, if a patient doesn’t like the taste of mint, you can accommodate by using an orange-flavoured hydro-xylate paste instead – thus making the experience a more pleasure-able one! Details like this helps ensure that a patient leaves the surgery feeling that they have experienced a good service, and are not likely to be as apprehen-sive should they have to return.

Communicate clearly

I firmly believe that the relation-ship between patient and practi-tioner is one that should be nur-tured, and good communication from both is vitally important. I believe that the relationship between practitioner and patient needs to be one of trust and respect, and I believe that it is very difficult to feel this way about a patient when all you have in your chair is the equivalent of a sheet of medi-cal facts. Of course, knowing your patient’s favourite colour is slightly too much detail, but a certain amount of personal in-formation is useful!

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