Removing the *gap* between *expectation* and *reality*

Priya Sharma¹ explores how best to manage patient expectations in the dental chair and align them with reality.

An expectation is defined as a 'strong belief that something will happen or be the case'. It is human nature to have certain views on the probability of an outcome or event occurring. Without a doubt patients will have certain expectations of their dental care and treatment. Generally it may be said that patients' views of positive outcomes have increased, partly due to the fact of the rapid advances in dentistry, information at everyone's fingertips (eg

internet, social media, etc) amongst others. We are bombarded with unrealistic, 'gold standard' celebrity idealised appearances. In a culture where there is an increased demand for taking the perfect selfie and having an idyllic Instagram profile, there is a great demand for smile makeovers and other procedures. People know exactly what they want and have the desire to perfect their smile. Be mindful that these elective cosmetic procedures often will have an inherent emotional component (eg desire for increased confidence, self-esteem, etc) and it is important to tease them out. Patients are now equal partners in their health. Thankfully, gone are the days of the passive, submissive patient and the paternalistic dental professional. This article will address how best to manage patient expectations and align these expectations with reality.

General Dental Council

The General Dental Council's (GDC's) *Standards for the dental team*¹ state the following:

'Patients expect:

- To be listened to and have their preferences and concerns taken into account
- To be treated as individuals and have their cultures and values respected
- That all members of the dental team will be honest and act with integrity
- That all aspects of their health and well-being will be considered and they will receive dental care that is appropriate for them...'

It is important to be fully aware of the required GDC Standards and working with them in mind will lead to optimal clinical practice.

First steps

The majority of patients will go in with some level of expectation of their dental care. Indeed, this is increased several fold in relation to the art and science of cosmetic dentistry, partly due to the fact that these procedures are elective and the main function is to improve aesthetics.

It becomes the goal of the dental professional to remove the gap between expectation and reality. In some cases, the patient may have unrealistic hopes of the

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EXPECTATION **REALITY**

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outcome of the treatment. It is paramount that an open, unbiased patient consultation takes place with full engagement from the patient. A rigorous treatment plan will demonstrate what can and cannot be achieved. Full transparency in this process is critical in ensuring that the patient is not let down.

Treatment plan

A thorough examination along with a patient's dento-medical and social history will lay the foundation of a successful treatment plan. A comprehensive dental check-up will include radiographs if required, intra- and extra-oral exam, BPE and any other specific requirements should be met. It is important to determine at the initial stages what the patient expects out of a specific course of treatment. This should be revisited throughout treatment.

A written dental treatment plan should be provided to the patient so that they can reflect on their treatment options and the associated risks and benefits. The fee structure should be clearly outlined along with an approximation of the time required for a specific course of treatment. Allow the patient to take the plan

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with them along with any other information (eg leaflets, diagrams, photos, video links, etc). This will allow the patient to digest and reflect on the treatment plan giving them a further opportunity to consider their own personal expectations. The majority of patients will come to their next appointment armed with questions and the dental team should provide an unbiased response to their queries. It is helpful to ask open-ended questions to determine exactly what the patient is after. While the written plan is extremely helpful it is by no means a replacement for a one-to-one consultation.

Acknowledge the fact that sometimes it is not possible clinically to provide the end result the patient may want. Do not promise the impossible. Ensure that the patient is aware of the limitations and what truly is dentally possible. Remember patients will expect that their dentition is functional and aesthetic. They will want to understand the life expectancy of their treatment. Appreciate that often there will be an associated socio-psychological impact of their dental treatment on their health and life in general. Throughout, plan the journey and both the

dental team and patient must agree with the final destination.

Record keeping

Remember to keep comprehensive contemporaneous records of all patient interactions and appointments.

Wax-ups and study models

Study models will allow for further planning if required and help to understand and visualise the final results of dental treatment.

but you must learn to empathetically have active listening skills. Care must be provided in a holistic manner.

Patient understanding

Throughout, it is mandatory to ensure that the patient is actually understanding what is involved in their treatment plan. Simply ask them: 'If you can explain to me what your understanding is about the treatment options and any associated risks and benefits'. This will allow you to fill in any potential gaps in their understanding. This is a good time to

'Do not promise the impossible. Ensure that the patient is aware of the limitations and what truly is dentally possible'

Technology

With an exponential rise in digital technology, now is the time to harness its potential. Software can now three dimensionally indicate the various stages of treatment and the end result.

In addition, high quality digital dental photography will enable patients to discuss what they are after and why they are seeking treatment. Throughout treatment these can also give you various benchmarks of the progression of treatment.

Communication is key

To make this dental process rewarding for everyone it is important to maintain seamless and transparent communication. Be mindful that your non-verbal communication is in line with your verbal communication. Generally, dental treatment is complicated and is multifaceted. Be careful to avoid dental phraseology and jargon. Clearly communicate using visual aids to help enhance understanding. It is not only what you say

discuss their views on their dental treatment.

With an abundance of false information and advertising it is possible that the patient may want to achieve the unattainable. It is your duty to discuss this in a balanced, well thought-out manner. It is also an opportunity to further stress the importance of an oral health maintenance plan to ensure the continued success of their dental treatment.

Be sure to seek full valid informed consent from the patient and remember this needs to be revisited throughout treatment. Realistic and predictable treatment plans in line with patient expectations will allow for the patient being content post-treatment. Many professionals ask the patient to sign the treatment plan indicating that they have read, understood and agree with the proposed treatment. It can be said that the fully informed patient will have realistic expectations and in turn report high satisfaction rates from their dental treatment.

Conclusion

At the heart of managing patient expectations is transparency. Each patient is unique and will have individual hopes of what they would like to achieve with their dental treatment. It is of paramount importance that the entire dental team is consistent. A consistent, honest and open environment should be maintained at the dental practice. Communication is integral to the successful management of patients' desires. The whole process for the dental team should be rewarding if managed professionally.

References

1. General Dental Council. *Standards for the dental team*. Updated 2018. Available at: <https://www.gdc-uk.org/professionals/standards> (accessed July 2019).

Further information

Read more *BDJ Team* articles from Priya Sharma:

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