

Managing patient expectations



Alison Large, dento-legal adviser at the Dental Defence Union (DDU), discusses how the dental team can successfully manage patient expectations.

Patients and dental professionals may sometimes have different expectations as to the outcome of treatment. Unfortunately, this is particularly relevant since the reopening of dental practices, following the Coronavirus lockdown, with many practices facing limitations in the number of patients that they can see as well as delayed or interrupted courses of treatment causing a significant backlog.

However, patient expectations do not just apply to dental care; patients may also have concerns that non-clinical aspects of their attendance did not meet their expectations or perceive that something went wrong - when in actual fact, from the dentist's perspective, the treatment provided was to an appropriate standard. Such issues can include the emotional impact of the experience, or whether or not they feel cared about and cared for by the dental team.

It is important to remember that complaints are not always made directly to the dental practice. Patients may choose to involve other organisations such as the Dental Complaints Service or the NHS, which may trigger other investigations.

So what factors might cause a patient to have unrealistic expectations when receiving dental treatment?

- **Lack of information** - patients may not have been appropriately informed about what to expect. They could have unrealistic expectations about things like waiting times, treatment availability or complications of treatment
- **Too much information** - patients might attend their dentist with a preconception of how they will be treated. This might be because they have based their expectations on pre-lockdown systems remaining in place or the experiences of friends or relatives whose situation may have been different
- **Time pressures** - it can be challenging to

manage appointment times with all the new precautions that are required to be in place for the safe running of a dental practice. Spending sufficient time talking to a patient to check they fully understand the issues involved in their care, the potential complications of their treatment, or alternative treatment options is still a vitally important step, so do ensure time is additionally made for this

- **Anxiety** - if a patient is anxious when they see a dentist, this can compound the factors above and make misunderstandings more likely.

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How to manage patients' expectations

There are a number of ways expectations can be managed by the dental team to maximise patient satisfaction while also minimising the risk of a complaint arising.

Ensure information is easily accessible

Clear and consistent information from all members of the practice team, on your website, on answering machines and posters in waiting rooms can help patients know what to expect.

This is particularly useful in ensuring that patients know how long appointments should last, the procedures when arriving at the dental practice, opening times, treatment fees etc.

Communicate in a way the patient can understand

Remember that each patient is different, and will have different needs and levels of understanding. Try to avoid dental terminology, abbreviations and jargon, and with the patient's permission, involve those close to them in the discussion where appropriate.

Utilising remote consulting, providing patient information leaflets or information about extra resources for the patient to read at home may all be helpful additions to the information you provide the patient in surgery

Check the patient's understanding and let them ask questions

There are many reasons why a patient might have difficulty absorbing what you say. You can check they have understood by asking them to repeat what you've said.

Show empathy and understanding

Establishing a good rapport and professional relationship with your patient goes a long way to gaining their trust, and as a consequence, improving their experience of their care.

Be open to feedback

Developing a non-confrontational way for patients to discuss concerns or leave feedback

can allow you to address any issues early and hopefully avoid escalation to a complaint. This might also help you to make any changes that can improve patient confidence in the care you provide. Providing patients with opportunities for them to discuss their care also lets you reassure them, manage their expectations and build trust.

Patients and the dental team will always have different perspectives, especially as society adjusts to a 'new normal', but by being aware of these differences, dental professionals can anticipate concerns and seek to manage the situation effectively.

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