



# Patient Communication: A Guide for Dentists



**New Brunswick  
Dental Society**  
**Société Dentaire du  
Nouveau-Brunswick**

# Your guide to better patient communication

This guide outlines some simple strategies and tips for improving communication with your patients.

Research indicates that 'soft skills' have a direct bearing on patient perceptions of the value of care provided, the degree of trust placed in the dentist and the success of treatment.

Although you may be familiar with some of the communication strategies included in this guide, reviewing them may strengthen communication with your patients and remind you to be as consistent as possible.



## The goal of effective communication is simple:

To empower your patients with the knowledge required to make an informed decision about their oral health. It is up to us to communicate our goals and expert opinions about our patients' oral health so that you and your patient can determine the best treatment option.

A woman with dark hair is lying on a blue dental chair, looking upwards with her right hand raised. She is wearing a white dental bib. The background is a blurred clinical setting.

Why good  
patient  
communication  
is important

If you include your patients as fully-informed partners in their care, they'll return the gesture by being loyal and continuing care with you. As an added bonus, you'll discover more satisfaction in your work, renewed motivation and increased productivity.

Considering patients will judge you by the way you interact with them, it is vital that you understand your own communication style and adjust to meet the needs of various patients. When patients have a positive experience in your practice, not only will they be more inclined to accept recommended treatment and return for ongoing care, they will also refer friends and family. This will help build your reputation and practice as well as enhance the image of our profession overall.



### 1 Increased patient satisfaction

Medical evidence has demonstrated a positive association between a patient's satisfaction with the care they receive and their provider's ability and willingness to communicate and empathize with them.

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### 2 Reduced complaints

Open dialogue with patients results in better patient retention and a reduction in complaints. It is estimated that 75% of the complaints received at the NBDS could have been resolved through better communication between dentist and patient and never evolved into written complaints.

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### 3 Improved efficiency

Improved communication with your patients will make your practice more efficient. For example, giving patients time to express their concerns doesn't take any longer but can significantly reduce the likelihood of late-arising concerns or missed opportunities to gather important data.

# Communicating with care

## The dentist-patient relationship

The first law of patient care is:

**Patient Satisfaction = Perception – Expectations**

If your patient perceives care at a certain level but expected something more or different, then they will be dissatisfied. Both perception and expectation are states of mind and you need to consider these if you want to keep your patients happy.



In its most basic form, good patient care consists of listening to, understanding and responding to your patients' needs.

While your oral health knowledge and clinical skills may be exceptional, few of us are taught the 'soft skills' of patient communication.

While there are a multitude of patient needs, six basic needs stand out:

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- 1 Friendliness**  
Basic courtesy and politeness; being warm and caring.
  - 2 Empathy**  
The patient needs to know that the dentist appreciates their wants and circumstances and provides personal attention.
  - 3 Efficiency and punctuality**  
The patient wants to feel they are respected.
  - 4 Control**  
The patient wants to feel that they are an important part of their own treatment plan.
  - 5 Options and alternatives**  
The patient wants to know what treatment options are available; explaining options thoroughly.
  - 6 Information**  
The patient wants to know about fees and services but in a pertinent and time-sensitive manner.



The fundamentals  
of patient relations

Patients want to be treated as individuals, not numbers. Here are a few rules of thumb for patient relations, of which you and your staff should be mindful:

- The patient is never an interruption to your work – the patient is your work. Everything else can wait.
- Even if you are delegating a task to a member of your staff, a casual “How are you feeling” gesture while your colleague does the work will comfort your patient.
- Never argue with a patient. The patient is always right (in their own eyes). Be a good listener, agree with your patient where you can, and do what you can to make them happy.
- Never make the first point of contact with your patient about finances. Too often the first question asked is, “Do you have insurance?” Discuss money matters at the appropriate time – only after treatment options have been determined and fully explained to the patient.

Portrait of the ‘ideal’  
dentist from the  
patient’s perspective:

### Confident

The dentist’s confidence gives me confidence.

### Empathetic

The dentist tries to understand what I am feeling and experiencing, and communicates that understanding to me.

### Humane

The dentist is caring, compassionate and kind.

### Personal

The dentist is interested in me, interacts with me, and remembers me as an individual.

### Frank

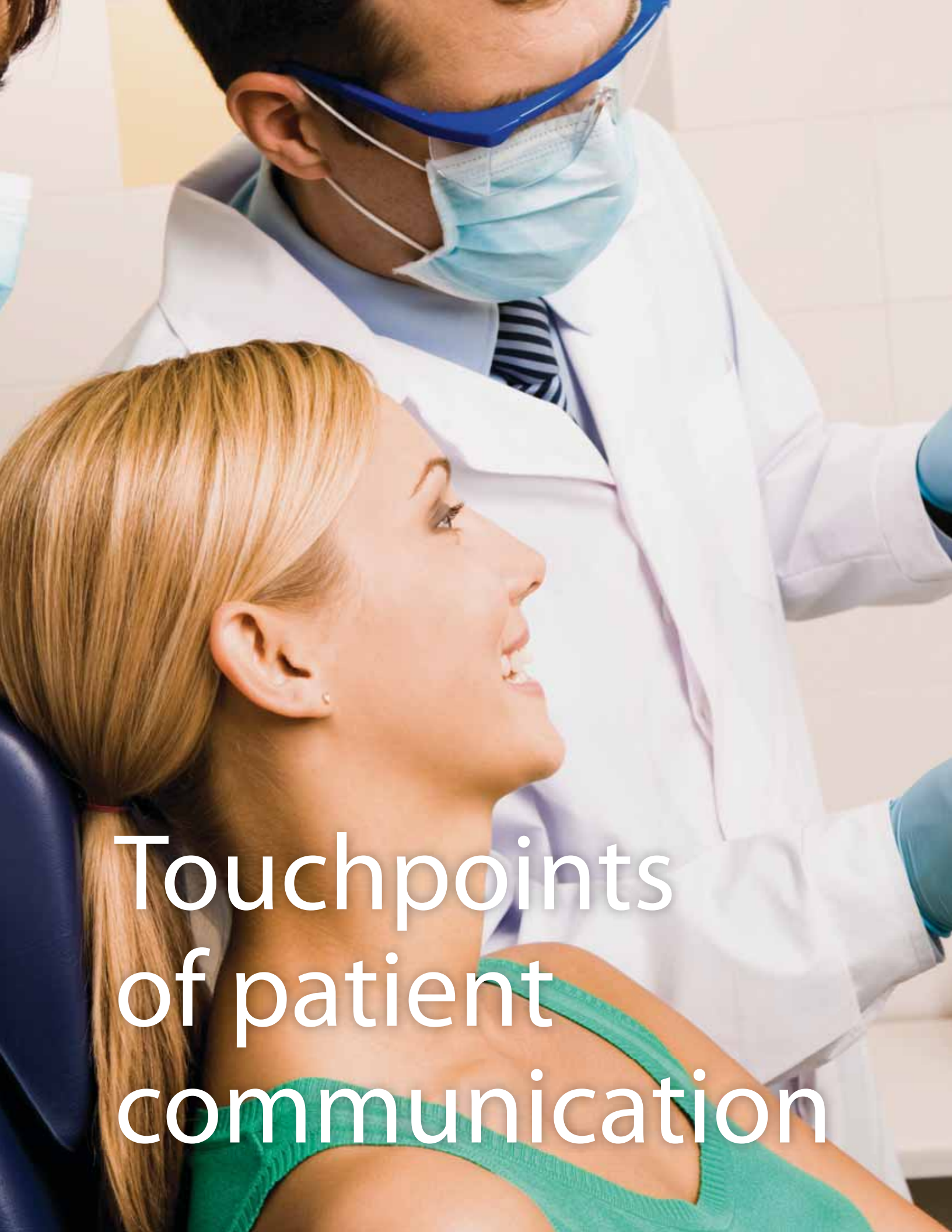
The dentist tells me what I need to know in plain language and in a forthright manner.

### Respectful

The dentist takes my input seriously and works with me.

### Thorough

The dentist is conscientious and persistent.



Touchpoints  
of patient  
communication

There are five key moments of interaction with your patients during their visit to your clinic. Each component can influence your patients' overall experience and their level of satisfaction.

## 1 The initial contact

The initial clinical encounter sets the tone for all other interactions throughout the visit. It may also be your best opportunity to avoid future misunderstandings or mismatched expectations between you and your patient.

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### Get the patient encounter off to a good start.

As we know, first impressions matter. Try to spend a few moments to slow down and focus your attention on meeting your patient's needs.

- Be the first to greet your patient in the operating room.
- Explain what will happen during their visit and introduce them to staff members who will be providing care.
- Greet every patient with a friendly smile.
- Call patients by name.
- Introduce any colleagues who may accompany you.
- Sit at eye level.
- Listen attentively to their concerns.
- Don't use technical jargon or terms that convey value judgments.
- Ask permission to examine the patient.
- Take the leadership role and guide the patient through the appointment.

## 2 The dental examination

The dental examination is one of the most important, under-appreciated or even misunderstood components of the dental visit. For most of us, this is a routine procedure, but for many patients it is perhaps the highlight of their visit and the only point at which they will have to interact directly with you. It is an opportunity to educate your patients as to what is involved in the examination process.

Most patients have no idea what the dentist does or what the dentist is looking for during the dental exam. An open discussion with your patient will help them better understand the value of what you do and enhance the relationship you have with them.

- Point out that you are checking things such as gum condition, overall health and function of the jaw, soft tissue condition, teeth spacing and bite, and so on.
- Explain what you are looking for as you proceed through the examination and provide the patient with a summary of your findings when you are finished.
- Encourage patients to ask questions so that they feel they are an active member of the oral health team.

## 3 Discussing treatment options

In order for your patients to feel like true partners in their oral health care, they must be fully informed of the treatment options available to them. Be thorough in your explanation of treatment options so the patient understands the pros and cons of each. This is an opportunity to demonstrate your clinical expertise and to build trust in your abilities and motivations.

**Use plain language to describe the recommended courses of treatment; avoid using jargon as much as possible:**

- Lay out the options in a logical manner. For example, from the least complex (and costly) procedure to the most complex. Explain the reasons that account for each option.
- When possible, provide simple printed materials for the patient to take home.
- Avoid being judgmental about the patient's choice of treatment.
- Ensure that all instructions for any treatment are as detailed and specific as possible.
- Check that you have been understood. Ask the patient if they have any questions and correct any misunderstandings as necessary.

### INFORMED CONSENT

In the context of a dental office, informed consent is "permission obtained as a result of the process of information sharing in ongoing dialogue between the dentist and patient". No treatment should be performed without the express or implied consent of the patient. The onus is on you, the health care provider, to ensure that whatever decision a patient makes, to accept or decline treatment, it must be informed. Consent must be obtained in advance of treatment – not in the middle and not after the fact. Remember to document consent decisions in the patient chart.

## 4 Discussing fees and insurance

Let's face it – discussing fees with our patients is rarely comfortable. But if we deal with the cost issue with honesty and openness, we can avoid misunderstandings and dissatisfaction after the fact. Many patients are embarrassed to ask about fees, so it's important for us to take the lead.

### Dispelling misconceptions

There is a perception among some patients that we are not transparent in what we charge and that fees for the same procedures vary widely from dentist to dentist for no valid reason. Some patients also believe that they are charged differently depending on whether they have dental insurance or not. The fee discussion is a golden opportunity to dispel the misconceptions about our profession in a way that builds trust and confidence in your relationship with your patient.

### Transparency in the numbers

You should be thorough when explaining fees to patients so they understand and appreciate the underlying value of the oral health care services you and your staff perform.

Your patients need to know that fees are determined on the basis of many factors; factors which are constant regardless of your patient's insured status. These can include the time it takes to perform the procedure; the cost of specialized materials and lab work; responsibilities related to scientific or specialized knowledge necessary to carry out the procedure; and practice-related costs such as overhead and staffing.

### When talking about the fee for service with your patient:

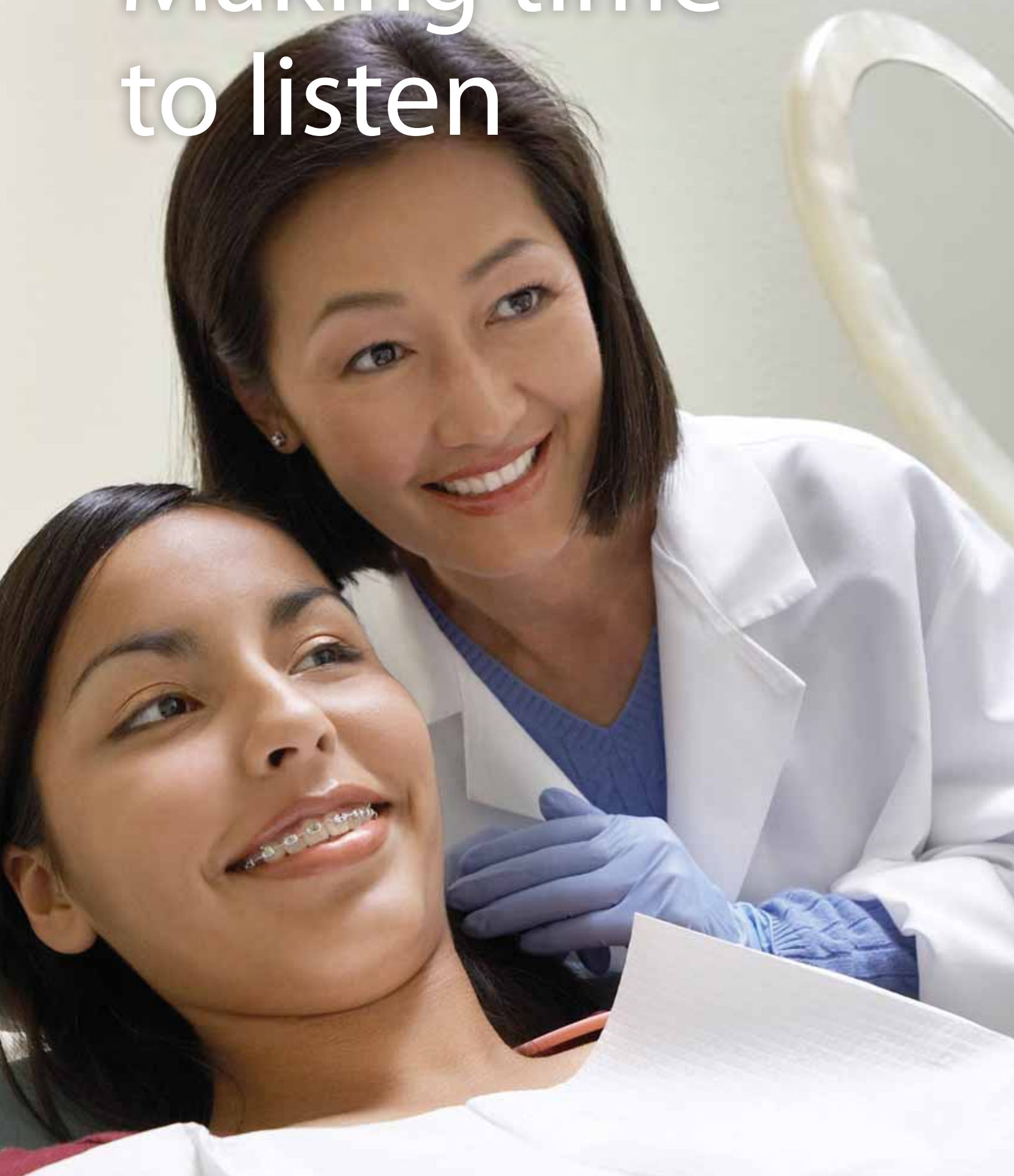
- Initiate the fee conversation as patients often feel intimidated to do so.
- Be specific about all the factors involved that determine the final fee.
- Approach the conversation with frankness and look for spoken and unspoken concerns coming from the patient.
- Discuss payment options which allow the patient to be in a position to make the optimal treatment decision.
- Always hold the discussion with the patient sitting upright in the chair.
- Avoid shifting the discussion to other staff before your patient is ready to do so.

## 5 Concluding the visit

The last few minutes of the patient consultation are just as important as the first. Ask your patient if they understand the treatment options discussed or have any questions.

- Look at your patient when speaking to them and avoid turning your back while anyone is speaking to you.
- Don't conclude your final conversation en route to the door or when walking away.
- Confirm your patient's treatment plan or follow-up.
- End the consultation with a reinforcing-type of physical contact. When appropriate, personally escort your patient to the reception area.
- At a minimum, use your patient's name at the beginning and at the end of the interaction.

Making time  
to listen



You are the expert on clinical dentistry, but your patients are the experts on their own decisions and how they impact them. We are expected to express expert opinions based on clinical findings and their implications.

While you will always know more than your patients about dental diseases and problems, you place yourself on precarious ground when you imply that you know better than your patients about how dental care should fit into their lives. When you do so, you cross a boundary; your clinical opinion will have less impact than it might have otherwise.

The road to understanding begins with genuine interest. Curiosity is one of the communication skills you must master if you want to create functional relationships with your patients.

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### Listening and learning come before telling and educating

In many of our practices, the emphasis is on telling rather than on listening to the patient.

Become interested and curious. Ask. Listen. Ask some more. Listen some more. Understand. Respect. Then, tell. This process puts significant emphasis on understanding our patients before the examination begins.

Counselling techniques are invaluable in gaining an understanding of your patient and helping them adopt new behaviours that are important to promoting good oral health. By first trying to understand your patient's perspective you encourage him or her to develop a sense of competence and autonomy. Rather than telling patients what to do or what is right for them, you can help them find their own way to make needed changes or adopt new behaviours.

### Practice listening skills

What many of us don't realize is that the most critical and powerful aspect of communication is not speaking, but listening. Listening shapes speaking. By listening effectively and really understanding the thoughts and concerns of our patients, we generate a powerful relationship with them. If your patient feels that you have been an attentive listener he or she will be comforted, reassured, and more likely to leave with a positive impression.

# The power of apology

If you have erred, say so. Mistakes happen to all of us. Thoughtless comments can be harmful, but taking responsibility can go a long way to regain lost ground.

Defensiveness and blame intensify emotions and make resolution difficult - even when the issue is small.

Small issues can grow into larger ones, if not addressed immediately with openness and sincerity.

# Rating your communication skills

It's easy to assume the way you currently communicate with your patients is working. Recent Canadian Dental Association research conducted with dentists and patients across the country points out some gaps in understanding.

Dentists said patient relationships are the most important factor in building trust and that trust is built on transparency, openness and communication.

Patients said they felt dentist feedback was like “being scolded” and that dentists provide inconsistent information, are unclear about what they are doing – especially during an oral exam – and shift fee and other conversations to their staff.

The quality of the conversation is as important as the content. So asking about your patient's hobbies, family and work is a great start. Speaking about the clinical, financial and health considerations that are top of mind to your patient is equally, if not more, relevant in building rapport.

Self assessment	Always	Never	Sometimes
Do you take the time to explain the agenda for each patient's visit?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you feel rushed within each appointment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
During the dental exam do you explain what you're seeing and looking for?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When an exam is over, do you ask the patient if they have any questions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you discuss the pros and cons of treatment options?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you expressed, as the expert, your preferred option of treatment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you supply patients with information they can take home with them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you take the time to discuss fees for treatment directly with your patient?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you inform the patient of payment options?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

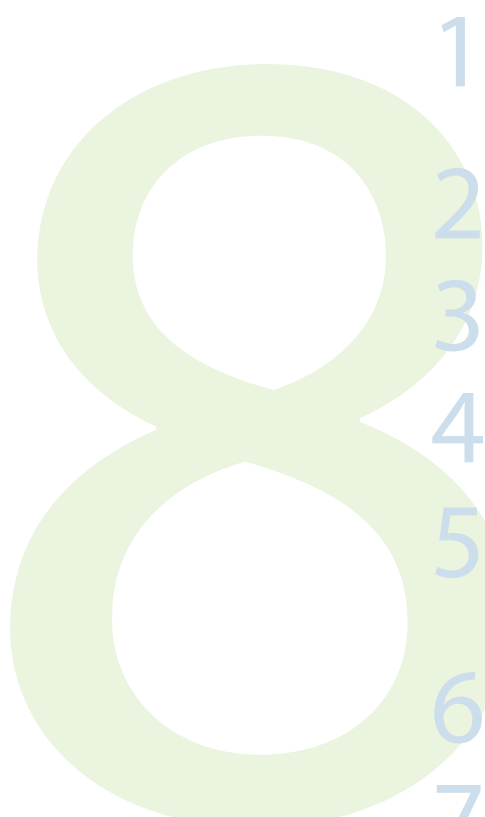
If this quick check has you intrigued, try the full set of interactive self assessment tools on the Patient Communications section on the CDA website.

- Go to <http://www.cda-adc.ca>.
- Choose the “Members” section and log in with your CDA username and password.
- Click on Patient Communications.

# Dealing with difficult patients

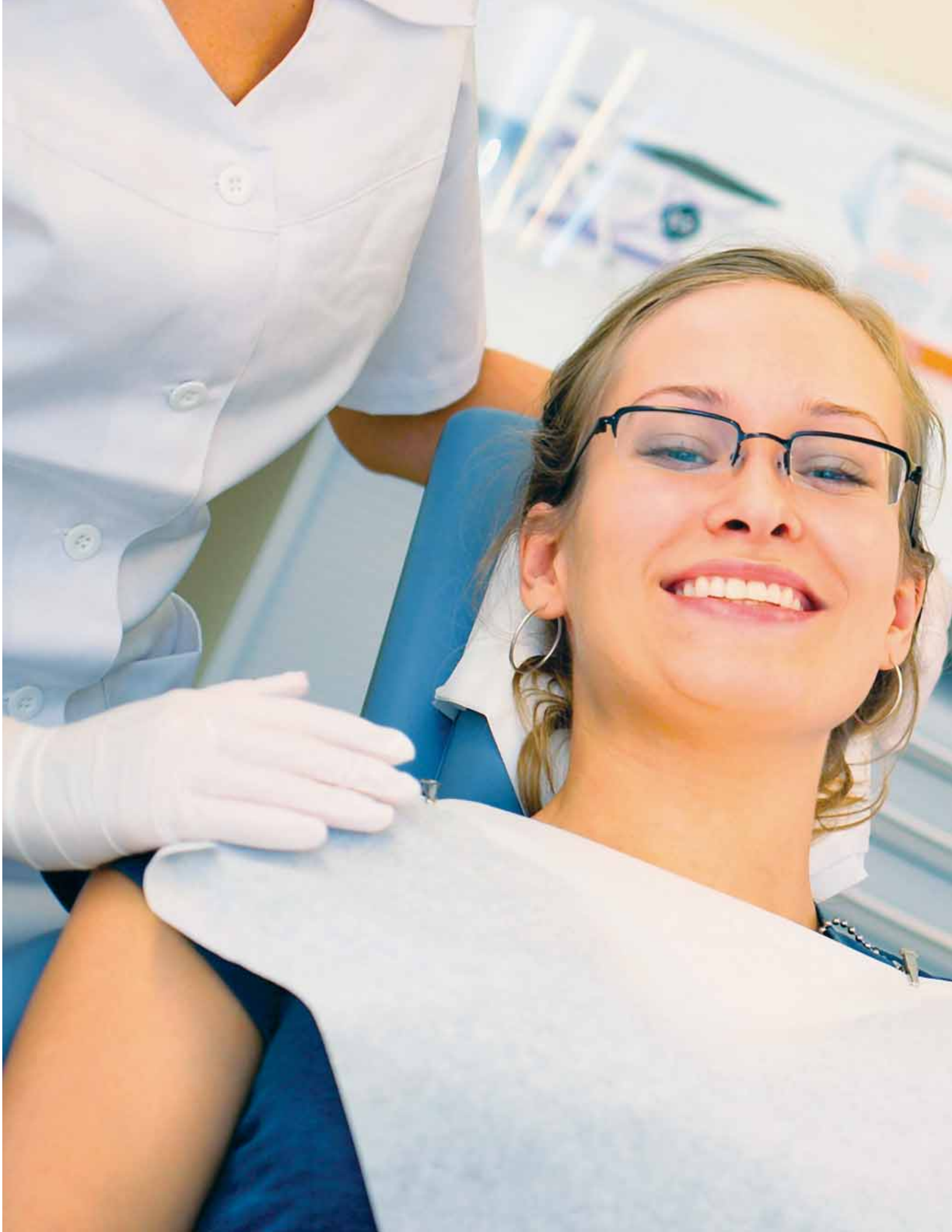
Learn to see each problem as an opportunity for improvement.

Here are some steps for dealing with difficult patients:

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- 1 Avoid downplaying the seriousness of the patient's complaint. Let the patient tell you their side of the story without interruption. Sometimes all they need is to be heard.
  - 2 Express empathy. Let patients know that you understand the problem and are concerned about their feelings.
  - 3 Patients need to hear that you are on their side and are willing to do whatever it takes to solve their problem.
  - 4 Do not go on the defensive. You are certain to lose the patient if you become confrontational.
  - 5 Take control of the situation. Once you have heard the patient's side of the story, take the appropriate action to resolve the problem.
  - 6 Ask the patient what they want. You may be surprised to find that the patient's solution to the problem is both fair and simple.
  - 7 Once you have established a plan of action, sell it. Explain to your patient how the plan will solve the problem.
  - 8 Ensure that the plan has been carried out and the results are acceptable to your patient – follow-up to ensure your patient is happy with the way you have handled the problem.

By following these simple steps, your most difficult patient can become your most valuable patient.

Experience shows that a dissatisfied patient will share their story with more people than will a satisfied patient.



# Adopting a team approach

It's not enough to improve your own communication skills – you must engage your staff as well. Remember that your team members are representatives of your practice – they are the ones your patients turn to for information regarding appointments, referrals, billing and lab tests.

Great teams are created. A true team works well together and does not come apart at the seams when the workday becomes challenging. You should look at your staff and evaluate each individual's commitment to effective communication with patients and other members of the team.

**Hold effective staff meetings:** Every practice needs to create opportunities for team members to work together and exchange ideas. To successfully determine where your team stands, schedule a meeting where staff can respond thoughtfully to a number of questions. The answers will be the first step toward collaboration and improved communication within the office and with patients:

- Do you think the team communicates clearly? Consistently? Often enough?
- In what areas can the team improve communication?
- Are there practice/patient communication processes that could be improved?
- What would be the single most important step we as a team could take to improve communication with patients?

These questions should be openly discussed as a team. If any questions elicit uncomfortable silences, then set aside time to meet with staff members individually. Most importantly, this exercise should be open and candid. After this meeting, let team members know how their responses will be used to benefit everyone in the practice.

How your team reacts to these queries will give you a feel for the practice's challenges and strengths. The team's answers will provide insight about what is working in your practice and what is not. In areas where there are clearly deficiencies, team education will be required.

**Set goals:** Use the information you gathered to set goals for improvement. Share these goals with the team. They will appreciate that you listened to their feedback and, as a result, will be more accepting of the positive changes you wish to make.

**Implement systems:** Goals without a plan to accomplish them are just ideas. It's time to take the goals that have been set and create effective ways to accomplish them. With step-by-step systems in place, including ones for patient communication, your practice will easily build a strong team. From scheduling to tray setup, it is important for the team to know exactly what to do, what to say and how to say it.

**Train the team:** Training and cross-training are important ingredients for ensuring all members of your team are communicating effectively. Training also establishes a level of accountability for communication when combined with job descriptions for each team position. The instruction of team members is not something that can be effectively accomplished in the time we may have between patient appointments. To ensure that your team members fully understand their roles, time must be set aside away from patients, and maybe even outside the office, so that the proper focus can be achieved. Monthly meetings are also an opportunity for hands-on training, when your staff can work with scripts and role-playing to help reinforce consistent communications approaches.



# Measuring patient satisfaction

Satisfied patients become loyal patients and are more likely to refer friends and family. Patient satisfaction surveys are an easy tool you can use to answer this question and they can help you identify ways of improving your practice – which translates into better care, happy patients and happier staff.

It's important to move beyond 'gut feel' and systematically measure and monitor how your patients feel about their experiences so that you and your team receive honest feedback. This information can help boost morale, as well as engage the team on areas for continuous improvement. Monitoring patient satisfaction over time will enable your practice to celebrate improvements and nip unwanted trends in the bud.

It's easy to carry out patient satisfaction surveys – it can be as simple as asking your patients to fill out a form. Most patients are happy to provide feedback – after all, their input allows you to improve the service you offer them.

**Survey tools:** You don't need to go to an outside consultant to create and conduct a survey in your office. You can conduct an informal verbal survey by asking each patient about their experience at the conclusion of their visit – take a second to ask and take a minute to listen. Keep track of the issues and encourage your staff to do the same.

Another technique involves the use of a simple form. Carefully craft five or six multiple choice questions, provide a consistent 1 to 5 rating scale (from poor to excellent) pre-printed on a single piece of paper. Include at least one open-ended question with

space for written comments. Patients can complete the form at the conclusion of their visit. You can also consider using an online survey tool.

**Keeping score:** With the paper survey, the online survey, and even the informal verbal survey, tabulate the quantifiable scores and review what you find with your staff at least monthly. Take pride in areas of strength and work on raising the score over the following month. The measures of your efforts will include increased patient satisfaction, stronger patient retention and more patient referrals.





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