



Communication – An Effective and Efficient Tool in Dentistry

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Abstract

Communication is required for a variety of reasons like to share information, comment, ask question, express feelings etc [1]. It is a process in which information is packaged and delivered using communication channels [2]. With the increase in diversity there has been an increase in languages. Thus, communication plays an important role not just in day to day life but in dentistry as well. In this article we will be going through the challenges faced by dentists to communicate with different types of patients and how to overcome them.

Keywords: Communication; Dentistry

Introduction

The act of conveying information from single person or group to other in the form of mutually understood signs, symbols or semiotics is known as communication. There are two types of communication, verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication is written or spoken form of communication, whereas non-verbal communication can be in the form of eye contact, facial expressions or gestures [3]. Non-verbal expressiveness of a clinician is under-emphasized. Some of the non-verbal behaviour comprises of expressing empathy, care and warmth [4]. The key to a successful healthcare is patient-clinician communication. Earlier the clinicians relied only on the innate information they could get from the patient [5]. In dentistry the prerequisites for a good practice are not just good knowledge and technical skills but effective interpersonal relation with the patient as well [6].

Importance of communication in dentistry

Effective interpersonal relation between a patient and a clinician is important in all healthcare systems. It is a fundamental component for achieving health literacy for patients. Health literacy is defined in Healthy People 2010 as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services for appropriate health decisions” [7].

The initial meeting between the dentist and the patient forms a framework for interpersonal relationship. It not only comprises of the dentist but also the other staff members of the clinic. A good interpersonal framework helps the patient to communicate their problems effectively and helps the dentist to understand them correctly [8].

A complete clinical care not just consist of “find it and fix it”, nonetheless the basic and most vital communication skills like engage, empathize, educate and enlist [5]. Engaging the patient by educating them about their problem and enlisting different modalities of treatment helps the patient in decision making. Involving patient in decision making gives them a sense of comfort regarding the treatment plan. Empathizing with what the patient is going through, (for example a severe dental phobia) builds a good rapport and reduces patient’s anxiety [9].

Another crucial part of communication is use of soft skills. The skills to communicate, lead, think creatively are called soft skills. An individual’s confidence, optimism, friendliness, professionalism and co-ordination are increased to a greater extent with soft skills. Dental practice requires use of knowledge, clinical efficiency, experience along with soft skills to achieve success and dynamic growth in practice [10].

Communication barriers in dentistry

Awareness about the importance of oral health has led to an increase in multicultural population approaching the dentist. Most likely the dentist must encounter patients that do not speak English. Such incidences can create communication barriers which hampers patient's treatment and satisfaction. Language barriers are often considered as most recurrent impediment in dental care [11]. The barriers pertaining to accepting dental care are generally in a two-person framework which is mirrored in dentist-patient relationship [12]. The lack of understanding patient's explanation of a problem, obtaining complete medical history and informed consent due to inadequate communication may place the patient at the risk and restricted treatment options [11]. Dental anxiety has been stressed as one of the most imperative barriers in a dental practice [12]. An anxious patient finds it difficult to communicate his/her problems clearly and are very apprehensive regarding the treatment plan.

How to overcome them

Effective clinician-patient communication must be emphasized and learned as both science and art. This increases patient satisfaction and reduces exposure to malpractice litigation [5]. Training in communication techniques can be beneficial in enhancing the scope of dental education, helping the future clinicians to respond and understand the needs of the patients in a better way [13]. Most of the dental schools have added health communication to their curriculum. It helps in teaching and assessing competencies in communication skills among the dental students for patient education and health promotion [14].

Apart from these communication variables that can be used and followed for the successful practice are [10]:

What is said?- The word used.

The words used should be clear and, in a language, that the patient understands.

How is it said?- The tone should not be high pitched?

Always a moderate and friendly tone should be used.

Who says things?- Dentist/Subordinate staff?

The treatment plan and the diagnosis should be mentioned by the dentist.

When is it said?- At examination/during treatment/on phone?

For a better communication, the dentist should finish the examination and then explain the patient about the treatment.

How it is shown?- Drawings/Photos/Models/PowerPoint presentation.

All these aids can be used to make the patient understand the procedure regarding a dental treatment.

Where it is said?- Working area/Clinic/reception counter/laboratory [10].

Once the treatment is over, the patient should be taken away from the working area into a more comfortable space and post-treatment instructions should be given.

These help the dentist to achieve the goal of a good clinician and a good academician [10].

Conclusion

Communication has always been a medium to express oneself and to understand the other person. In dentistry communication is the basis of everything. A dentist can win over a patient not with a perfect treatment plan but extremely impressive communication skills. Good communication between the patient and a dentist helps build a rapport, makes the patient comfortable so that they can communicate their fears and apprehensions freely and understand all the treatment options. A virtuous clinician listens to the concerns of a patient and explains the different treatment options available and helps the patient in making decision. This makes the patient comfortable and prepared for the further procedures. The communication variables like what is said, how is it said, how it is shown, where it is said are most important to empathize with the dental patient. Thus, it's the effective communication that brings back the patient to the dentist. As quoted by Ken Lui "Every act of communication is a miracle of translation".

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