Chairside Manner

Given the choice between competence and kindness, most people will tell you they’d prefer a competent dentist over a kind one. But why can’t competence and kindness go hand in hand? Chairside manner might not be the most important aspect of your practice – to you – but for some of your patients it’s just as important as the treatment you’re giving them. Heck, if chairside manner weren’t so integral, there wouldn’t be all those books and consultants out there helping clinicians like you do a better job of it.

Every dentist’s chairside manner varies. I wanted to learn more about how other Townies treat their patients, so I started a message board and asked for some help in putting this column together. Just like you can learn a new clinical procedure, you can learn better chairside manner. Here are a few elements of what I, and other Townies, think make up a decent chairside manner.

Empathize

Townie Eric Fugate said, “The most important aspect is remembering that we are doing strange things to people.” Most dentists wish it were different, but we are doing things that cause people pain and discomfort. No one likes to get a filling, and we need to remind our desensitized selves that the person in the chair is often uneasy and afraid. Yes, we need to do the best dentistry we can, but if you’re getting huffy when the patient raises his hand because he got zinged, it comes across pretty cold. Like Townie drcari says, remember, the stuff you do every day, while it is routine for you, it is completely foreign to most of your patients. I know there are a few of us who didn’t get into dentistry for the “touchy-feely stuff,” but patients these days are expecting a dose of compassion with their dental treatment. There are practices out there that take patient comfort to the extreme with massages, aromatherapy and warm towels, and they’re thriving! That’s how important this is! Not every patient will be apprehensive, but you have to put yourself in their shoes and remember what they might be feeling. Read their cues and pause if they need a break. Like Townie studyolic says, let them know you’re on their side.

Be a Straight Shooter

“This isn’t going to hurt,” is the biggest lie you could ever tell a patient. Are you kidding me? Of course this is going to hurt! But if you tell your patients the truth and reassure them that you’re going to do everything you can to make sure they’re comfortable, they’ll appreciate that. They’ll trust you. Let them know what they can expect – how it might feel, how long it will feel like that, whether or not they’ll feel sore later on, what over-the-counter meds might help, etc. Don’t use canned lines – just tell them exactly what you’re doing and what it entails, and tell them in plain English, which leads me to my next point.

Plain English, Please

Doctor, you learned 5,800 words of Latin and Greek in dental school. You basically know three languages and don’t even know it. When you’re explaining the treatment plan to your patients and you start spouting off all of these foreign terms, they’ll understand only one thing – you don’t give a damn about them. If your own mama never used the word, lose it. When you were just a little tyke and couldn’t find your shoes did your mother say, “Go to the mesial buccal corner of your bed, continued on page 14
and they should be sitting right there. Why are you standing on the distal side of the bed when I just explained it to you in plain Latin?” No, she didn’t. Save the high-falootin’ terms for when you’re hanging out with your colleagues at the Townie Meeting.

**Listen!**

Every patient is different, and each one has different concerns like aesthetics, cost, pain, etc. Are you truly listening to each of your patients? Are you fiddling around with your handpiece instead of looking your patients in the eyes? Does your body language show them that you’d rather just “get this done” than listen to them? You need to be able to address your patients’ needs. The only way you can start is by listening! Give them your full attention. Don’t interrupt and don’t think about what you’re going to say until after you’ve listened to them. If you disagree with anything they say, be polite. If you and your patient are both sitting upright, lean forward and give them good eye contact. Reiterate their concerns to them so they know that you understand what they’ve just said. Listening effectively is a tough skill to hone. You have to block out all other distractions and you have to want to hear what your patients have to say – anything less seems counterfeit.

**Make the Patient in Your Chair Your No. 1 Priority**

You might have an exam in the next room, another patient getting numb across the hall, and your dental lab and seven sales reps on hold, but the patient you’re with right now out doesn’t need to know that. Make the patient you’re currently talking to your only focus. Everything else – unless maybe you’re on fire – is secondary to the patient in your chair. Your patients altered their day, missed work and drove out of their way to see you. They’ll feel cheated if you’re not giving them anything but your undivided attention. Cheated patients will always find somewhere else to go, I promise you.

**Make ‘em Laugh**

A little levity never hurt anyone. I wouldn’t overdo it, but you wouldn’t believe how much a little laughter can loosen someone up.

**Adaptability**

Not all of your patients want to hear a joke or need warm fuzzies from you before you drill matter out of their mouths. Some of them just want to know that you’re competent and are going to do a good job. Doctor, you need to be able to adjust your chairside manner to fit the personalities of your patients. In the message board I started, Dr. Donato “Dino” Napoletano brought up the “Platinum Rule” – do unto others as they would have you do unto them. This doesn’t mean you have to change yourself or your message – just how you present it.

**Good Groomin’**

In the message board I started, I got a kick out of Townie sjlew’s post: “Make sure you don’t stink, you’re well groomed, don’t have bad breath, a unibrow, messy hair, a messy beard... and you don’t look like a slob.” He makes a great and often overlooked point. If your patients think you’re a mess – that you obviously don’t care about your own personal hygiene and well-being – what makes them think that you’ll give a damn about theirs? Or even more discouraging, will they think they’ll be taken care of the same way it seems you’ve taken care of yourself? Put some care into your appearance, doctor.
We-care Calls

Chairside manner extends well past the operatory. The evenings after we perform an invasive procedure on a patient, my office makes “we-care” calls. We ask the patients how they’re feeling and if they have any questions. These calls have caught some of my patients off guard — but in a really good way! They’re used to “drill ’em, fill ’em, bill ’em and leave ’em at the wayside to heal.” These calls go a long way to show how much you and your practice cares for your patients. I always make myself available to answer any of their questions and put them at ease as they’re recovering.

Other Tips You Might Consider

- Keep an open mind.
- Hire employees who have personalities.
- Kick superiority to the curb — your patients are your equal.
- Always treat your staff well in view of patients.
- When all is done, say, “Thank you.”

The goal here is to build trust within your patients to keep them coming back to your office for more. Being kind goes a long way. The most “Thank You” cards your practice will ever receive aren’t because you did a solid root canal or a stellar crown, but because you were kind, you listened and you explained everything to your patients in a language they could understand.