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Relationship Questions: The Glue to Create Powerful Doctor-Patient Bonds

By Janet Steward and Lawrence Steward, M.B.A.

QUESTION: I feel very comfortable with my clinical skills but my staff keeps hinting that they think I could do better relating with patients. How can I improve?

ANSWER: Your current approach to patient relationships is common among dentists, but it may be placing too much emphasis on increasing patients' dental IQ while underestimating the power of treating patients as unique individuals. The "problem" with the common approach is it assumes that patients are coming to your practice because they just want their teeth fixed. Naturally, some patients do, but most want more. They want relationships with professionals they know and trust.

Many corporations and business researchers have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars, and years of their time, studying the question of how their businesses can improve relationships with their customers.

The simple response, in spite of all that research, time, money, and volumes of reports and articles, can be condensed into two concepts: (1) ask questions that engage and (2) listen to the answers.

In fact, the art of asking questions is clearly the most powerful tool in creating personal and professional relationships. Of course, it does little good to ask questions if you don't listen to the answers, so it's obvious the two go hand in hand.

There are two types of questions that are important in dentistry: transactional and relationship builders. The transactional question is used to gain basic but important clinical information. These seek specific responses and often can be answered with yes, no, or a single word/phrase. These are questions typically asked of new patients, such as "are your teeth sensitive to hot or cold?" Most dental practices do a very respectable job asking transactional questions. While essential, be aware that they do not create patient bonds.

While transactional questions don't build patient relationships, the second category of questions are the powerful tools that spark patient-doctor bonds. Relationship questions are patient centered and designed to get to know the patient as a person. Good relationship questions can't be answered with a simple yes or no because they're designed to engage the patient in conversations about themselves.

Unless you ask, it's unlikely you'll learn the fact a patient has just received a new promotion at work, has written a book, has a new baby, or is a new grandparent. Sure, patients want a great dentist, but to them that means a dentist who is good clinically AND who understands and cares about them.

Successful dentists want to know more about their patients, but very often, while doing so, amazing things happen that benefit their practices as well. For example, by asking an older patient about his life, the dentist may learn this patient has a huge extended family and their current family dentist is retiring at the end of the month. The time it took to get to know the patriarch of the family may benefit the dentist with three-dozen new patients in the future (without a cent spent on external marketing)!



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Once the dentist has established a personal relationship, it's appropriate to move on to such issues as clinical history and experience, goals for dental health, and any current financial concerns they might have. (Remember, nearly everyone feels broke today, but most feel optimistic about their ability to afford important purchases at some time in the future.) Even when patients have huge financial obstacles for treatment acceptance today, establishing a bond with them ensures that, when they're ready, they'll come to you.

So what questions seem to get the best results? The best approaches are well rehearsed but very conversational and natural. For example, one doctor might start the conversation with a new patient by saying something similar to this after introductions: "One of the things I like to do in my practice is spend a little time with you as a patient just so I can get to know you better. So what's happening in your life?" Further questions then seem natural and are based on patients' responses.

When these questions are skillfully used and the doctor uses active listening skills, a transformation is taking place within patients. Suddenly, instead of being asked for passive information, they are being engaged. Somewhere inside the patient's brain, the message is sinking in: "this doctor really cares enough about me to find out about my life and what's important to me, my family and friends."

There is a time tested and true analogy that patients won't care about what you have to say until they know you care about them. Through the use of active listening skills, doctors are not using manipulation or other tricks just to sell something: they are genuinely interested. Despite their simplicity, relationship questions provide dramatic returns by creating lasting bonds with patients as real people who like to create relationships.

Janet and Lawrence Steward are speakers, consultants and authors. Their book, [What Do Dentists Really Want?](#) is available through www.Amazon.com or www.theManageDentPros.Com. Janet Steward, president of Quantum Leap Dental Consulting, can be reached at 970/207-0776.

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