

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE DENTAL PROFESSION

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As a dentist, your communication with a patient is of utmost importance. This means it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of your obligations regarding effective communication. This article discusses a clinical scenario where a dentist has not effectively communicated with a patient and provides some safeguards to prevent this.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION OBLIGATIONS

The Dental Board of Australia's Code of Conduct (Code) sets out a dentist's professional obligations with regards to engaging in and maintaining effective communication with patients and other treating practitioners. These obligations aim to promote good communication between a dentist and patient in order to ensure that a patient is fully informed and understands all aspects of treatment. The following discusses the implications arising from a clinical scenario regarding miscommunication.

CLINICAL SCENARIO

Joshua attends for an initial consultation with dentist, Dr Roslyn Keys, presenting with severe tooth ache in tooth 35. Joshua tells Roslyn that he has not seen a dentist for 10 years as he has significant anxiety regarding attending the dentist and that due to this he is after the quickest solution possible. Roslyn assesses Joshua's tooth including by radiographic and visual investigations and concludes that Joshua has a deep cavity in tooth 35. She presents treatment options to Joshua, including a crown with a root canal or an extraction. In response, Joshua reiterates that his priority is having treatment completed as quickly as possible due to his anxiety and asks whether Roslyn could potentially perform a filling on tooth 35 instead of the other options presented. Roslyn considers that a temporary filling could be performed to see how Joshua's tooth responds however she concludes that this is unlikely to be successful given the depth of the cavity. Accordingly, she tells Joshua 'it's too deep for a filling, you need a root canal and a crown, I'll book you in my next available appointment'. Joshua then asks if Roslyn could explain to him the root canal and crown procedure in order to alleviate some of his anxiety. Roslyn simply responds, 'I'll explain it before you have it done' and she schedules Joshua in for the root canal and crown treatment in a fortnight.

The following morning Roslyn attends the clinic and sees that she has had a cancellation that evening. Noting that Joshua's treatment is relatively urgent, Roslyn decides to contact Joshua to see if he would like the appointment. Roslyn calls Joshua and says to him 'I've had a cancellation tonight, I'll do your root canal and crown then'. Joshua feels very pressured by Roslyn's call and is anxious at the idea of having the root canal and crown performed that

same day. In response, he tells Roslyn he has changed his mind and asks that she cancels all appointments for him and advises he will go elsewhere.

The following scenario raises issues with Roslyn's communication including regarding her breach of her professional obligations under section 3.3 of the Code by:

1. failing to listen to and respect Joshua's preference to have any treatment completed as quickly as possible;
2. failing to take into account Joshua's health literacy (ability to understand health information), in particular that he has significant dental anxiety and adjusting her communication in response;
3. failing to provide Joshua with an adequate opportunity to question or refuse the root canal and crown treatment recommended; and
4. failing to respond to Joshua's question regarding the root canal and crown procedure.

LEARNINGS AND SAFEGUARDS

The scenario of Roslyn and Joshua displays a number of common communication errors. In particular, Roslyn's disregard for Joshua's comments regarding wanting a quick solution noting his anxiety regarding attending the dentist shows an arguable lack of respect for Joshua's concerns and preferences. Overall, Roslyn has failed to take into account Joshua's health literacy noting his anxiety regarding attending the dentist and she has not adjusted her communication in response. Roslyn contacting Joshua the following day has also led to a miscommunication as Roslyn did not explain that the reason for her call was that Joshua's treatment is relatively urgent and as a result, Joshua has misinterpreted this call as Roslyn pressuring him to have the treatment done. Dentists have a responsibility to ensure that all communication with patients is effective and clear. Breaches of professional obligations regarding communication have the potential to lead to distrust and a breakdown in the treating relationship between a dentist and their patient, as in Roslyn and Joshua's situation.

Safeguards against breaching professional obligations regarding communication include:

- employing clear and straightforward language when speaking with patients;
- responding to all questions and concerns posed by patients;
- being aware of a patient's health literacy and adapting communication with a patient accordingly; and
- spending time reflecting on a practitioner's own communication style and undertaking mentoring in this regard with a senior colleague.

If practitioners have experienced a miscommunication or are unsure about how best to discuss a particular health concern with a patient, they should seek assistance including from a senior colleague.

Safeguards for clinics to ensure that all dentists are practicing effective communication may include training for all new staff on communication styles and professional obligations relating to effective communication. Clinics can also organise regular meetings with staff to discuss effective communication and how to best communicate with a variety of patients and health practitioners. Clinics may also consider developing and implementing communication policies and procedures including regarding communicating with patients with dental anxiety.

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