

The Power of Conversation: Elevating Care Through Effective Communication

Dental hygienists' critical role in a patient's health journey extends well beyond treatment. Every day, they translate clinical findings into messages patients can understand, helping them see the importance of their oral health and motivating them to take action. When that connection isn't made, patients often leave without fully understanding—or accepting—the care they need.

Fortunately, no one is better positioned than a dental hygienist to engage and educate patients.

THE FRONT LINE OF CARE

"We're the preventive health specialists of our field," said Lisa Mayo, RDH, BSDH, MHA, a Dallas, TX-based hygienist and educator with 25 years of experience. "Hygiene is the only profession in dentistry founded on the theoretical principles of prevention, and those principles are built into how we're taught and trained." This foundation equips them to address diverse patient needs.

"Our training allows us to take an enormous amount of information and synthesize it on the spot," Mayo shared. In addition to assessing a patient's oral condition, hygienists often gain insight into systemic health, dental and medical literacy, personality type, cultural background, and more. This "holistic picture of a patient," as Mayo described it, helps hygienists tailor education and treatment recommendations accordingly while giving dentists a stronger starting point for diagnosis and treatment planning.

Hygienists have a unique vantage point when it comes to patient relationships. "In most practice set-



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tings, we're also the provider that spends the most time with patients," said Mayo. As the practice's primary point of contact, hygienists have an opportunity to build trust, answer questions, and guide patients forward in their oral health journey. Making the most of that opportunity to truly elevate care depends on effective communication.

CUTTING THROUGH COMPLEXITY

For many patients, clinical terminology sounds like another language. Even the most basic terms, like "prevention" and "perio," can cause confusion. The key to closing the gap, according to Mayo, involves creating common ground.

One key distinction hygienists must communicate is between preventive and restorative care. Without understanding this, patients may delay or decline critical treatment. Mayo finds simple, real-world analogies helpful: "When a patient presents with both tooth and gum problems, you can say, 'Your gums are like the foundation of your home—if your

foundation needs work, you're not going to spend money on painting the walls," she explained. In other words, the gums must be treated first before restorative care can proceed.

Although simplicity is usually a safe bet, Mayo cautions against language that may come across as condescending. "It's important to understand your patient's level of medical and dental IQ," she explained. "If I have a surgeon in my chair, they might prefer that I use the correct clinical terms." She also believes in calling conditions what they are—for example, describing a cavity as a chronic, progressive disease rather than simply "a small hole." Taking time to understand what a patient already knows and how much detail they want will inform how to teach them.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Even with careful wording, extensive treatment can overwhelm patients. According to Mayo, it's usually easy to spot when information overload sets in: "If you're talking to a patient and they say, 'Forget it, just pull my teeth,' you know you've failed to educate them correctly." Patients may also appear distracted or uninterested. To gauge understanding, Mayo recommends asking open-ended questions like, "What do you think about what I've said?"

Mayo also uses what's called the "chunking" method—breaking long-term treatment plans into bite-sized steps. "You have eight things you need to address: let's talk about number one and two today. When we get that done, we're going to move on to three and four." If you sense a patient has reached their limit for absorbing information, it may be time to pause the conversation. "If today we talked about their gums, screened for oral cancer, did a cleaning,

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and the doctor found three cavities, by the end of the appointment, they're done." Coming back another day, even for a free-of-charge visit, to review their bite or other issues can provide a long-term payoff.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Strategies like analogies and chunking only go so far when more complex obstacles arise. Common but challenging barriers—cost, shame, and cultural gaps—often surface during hygiene-patient conversations. Knowing how to tactfully navigate each can elevate communication and care outcomes.

The Cost Conversation

"The biggest barrier we face in dentistry and healthcare is financial," said Mayo. Patients' pushback often isn't about the value of care but whether they can afford it. "Recognizing and respecting your patient's cost concerns is really important," she emphasized. Mayo addresses financial stress head-on: "I'll say, 'I can see that what I'm saying is stressing you out. Is it the procedure itself? Or the cost?'"

Once cost is identified, she asks patients to temporarily set it aside to focus on health needs. "Once patients understand that aspect, I'll circle back and remind them that there are options to help cover the cost of treatment." Mayo also stresses the importance of being willing to discuss numbers directly with patients, which builds trust and improves treatment acceptance.

Dental Shame

Nearly three out of four adults fear going to the dentist, according to a 2025 study published in the *Journal of the American Dental Association*. Mayo notes that shame and self-blame often accompany dental diagnoses, particularly in younger patients. To reduce shame, she uses a "backdoor" approach: Before presenting severe findings, she asks about oral hygiene habits, diet, and family dental history. Many patients with extensive decay have a hereditary predisposition. This approach shifts the conversation from blame to problem-solving.

Bridging Cultural Gaps

Culture shapes patients' values, beliefs, and health decisions. Mayo encourages building cultural competency through continuing education, which helps hygienists better understand their patients and tailor communication for improved outcomes.

A LIFE OF LEARNING

Advances in technology continue to expand hygienists' ability to educate and engage patients. Mayo notes that intraoral scanning has "revolutionized" patient understanding: "When they see their mouth on the screen, I don't even have to open the conversation—they do it for me." While some hesitate to adopt digital tools, proper training and on-the-job learning can overcome that. "Be a lifelong learner...I'm on year 25, and I'm still learning new things."