

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Core of effective communication

Effective dentist-patient communication is essential for providing high-quality dental care. It involves a two-way exchange of accurate, complete, and concise information between the dentist and the patient. The goal of effective communication is to ensure that patients have the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their oral health. This includes discussing clinical care objectives, professional opinions, and treatment options with the patient to determine the best course of action for their oral health. In turn, building a long-term relationship with each other.

Communication between the doctor and your patient is important for a number of reasons, being a good doctor means doing no harm to your patient, and that includes using your communicative skills in a way that is constructive rather than hurtful.

Good communication between a doctor and their patient fosters a therapeutic relationship and improves patient satisfaction. In many cases, patient complaints are a result of poor communication skills which is a testament to its importance.

A doctor's communication skills encompass the ability to get the information needed to administer accurate diagnoses, counsel where needed, and establish the trust and respect of their patients.

These are the core clinical skills in the practice of medicine, and they assist you in giving your patient an experience where they feel safe and satisfied that they've been in good hands - this is integral for the effective delivery of health care.

Understanding why effective communication is very important for your exams:

- In ADC exams, examiners pretending to be patients are analysing if any patient would be comfortable coming back to you as a dentist.
- Along with having effective communication as our separate cluster, it also forms a huge component of your Global rating in exams.
- It will prepare us, in our clinical practice of Australia, honing these skills.

The components of effective communication:



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- The very first important aspect is for us to picture ourselves in their state. We have to be Human and not try to portray our knowledge or dental skills only.

- **Active listening:**

Active listening is a fundamental skill that enhances communication within the dental team.

It involves fully focusing on the speaker, avoiding interruptions, and providing thoughtful responses.

By actively listening to one another, team members can understand each other's perspectives, clarify information, and reduce the risk of errors.

This skill also contributes to a positive work environment where everyone feels respected and acknowledged.

- to listen to the way the words are said
- to be conscious of the feelings underlying the words spoken
- to recognise hidden feelings
- to be aware of what is left unsaid.

Often the main task of the listener is to help the person to express himself or herself. Again specific skills are involved in this. These are:

- encouraging the patient to talk
- giving attention to what is being said – being interested in the patient
- reflecting feelings – for instance, 'you seem pleased' or 'upset'
- paraphrasing – the patient's words to clarify what s/he has been telling you
- summing up – a brief summing-up of the main content and feelings the patient has alluded to during the interview.

The components of effective communication:

- **Non-verbal communication:**



Good nonverbal communication — facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice — is essential. Research suggests that the majority of daily communication is nonverbal, which stresses the importance that this aspect of communication plays in human interactions.

The ability to understand and use nonverbal communication, or body language, is a powerful tool that can help healthcare professionals connect with patients in a positive way and reinforce mutual understanding and respect.

The components of effective communication:

Providers should have situational awareness of their nonverbal communication so they can recognize potentially problematic body language and consciously change it. For example, certain situations might trigger negative nonverbal reactions, such as seeing a difficult patient, managing a patient complaint, or dealing with stress. A number of strategies can help healthcare providers consciously improve nonverbal communication. For example:

Smile and maintain appropriate eye contact, but do not stare.

Show interest in what the patient is saying and avoid tapping your fingers, looking at the clock, yawning, and other nonverbal actions that might indicate that you're bored or in a hurry.

Sit when you can, and lean forward to show that you're engaged. Don't stand looking down on the patient in a paternalistic stance.

Nod your head to show you are listening.

Maintain an open and relaxed posture and avoid crossing your arms or other gestures that might suggest unwillingness to listen, disapproval, or a judgmental attitude.

The **EMPATHY** Framework is a valuable tool that equips medical professionals with a structured approach to understanding patients' emotions. This easy-to-remember acronym (Eye contact, Muscles of facial expression, Posture, Affect, Tone of voice, Hearing the whole patient, Your response) serves as a checklist.

E: Eye Contact – Making eye contact demonstrates attentiveness and establishes trust with the patient. It also helps clinicians to detect small emotional swings via eye movements.

M: Muscles of Facial Expression – Recognising emotions on a patient's face is critical. Understanding grimaces, furrowed brows, and forced smiles can reveal important information about their emotions and anxieties.

P: Posture – An open posture (uncrossed arms, leaning slightly forward) indicates respect and attention, whereas a closed posture (crossed arms, slouching) may indicate uneasiness or defensiveness. Body Language portrays the passion for patient's care, recognised by the patient.

The components of effective communication:

A: Affect – Beyond words, clinicians should be mindful of their patients' overall emotional state. This could include recognising symptoms of worry, despair, or rage that would otherwise go unnoticed through spoken communication.

T: Tone of Voice – The manner in which something is delivered can be as important as the content. A kind and sympathetic tone fosters trust, but a loud or domineering tone creates distance and impairs communication.

H: Hearing the Whole Patient – Nonverbal cues do not exist in isolation. To completely understand a patient's emotional condition, doctors should take into account their story and background.

Y: Your Response – Being mindful of your own emotions is essential. Doctors should not let their emotions influence their perception of the patient's nonverbal signs.

- **Being Clear and Being Concise.**

Use plain, nonmedical language. Do not use medical or difficult words.

Use the patient's words. Take note of what words the patient uses to describe their illness and use them in your conversation.

Use common words that you would use to explain health information to your friends or family who do not work in healthcare, such as tummy or belly instead of abdomen. Avoid acronyms.

Use simple words instead of difficult ones (e.g., "helpful" instead of "beneficial," and "make worse" instead of "exacerbate").

If you think it is important that a patient learn a medical term, ask whether the patient is familiar with it and if not, define it in a way that is easy to understand. For example, you can ask, "What do you know about a test called haemoglobin A1C?" and if necessary, explain, "It is a way to measure how much sugar is in your blood over the past 3 months. It tells us whether your diabetes is under control."

Slow down. Speak at an unhurried pace and say the words clearly.

Be specific and concrete. Do not use vague and subjective terms that can be interpreted in different ways.

The components of effective communication:

Draw pictures, use illustrations. All pictures and models should be simple, designed to demonstrate only the important concepts, without overly detailed anatomy.

Show how it's done. Whether flossing or brushing your teeth, a demonstration of how to do something is clearer than a verbal explanation.

- **Being confident and being patient.**

Using encouraging words or phrases like: "I'm confident we can handle this" or "We'll take care of it". Thus reassuring in an assertive way.

Focus on the moment. If a patient needs extra time or clarification, we will offer it without showing impatience.

Advanced communication skills:

- **DEALING WITH THE FOLLOWING SITUATIONS:**

- **Anxious patients.**
- **Vulnerable patients. (Rural/ remote community, Aboriginal community, abuse or suspected abuse, international student as a patient).**
- **Gaining informed consent.**
- **Handling demanding patients.**
- **Handling patients with complaints.**

- **Anxious patients.**

Dealing with anxious patients in a dental setting requires a blend of empathy, clear communication, and calming techniques to create a reassuring environment.

Acknowledge Their Fear: "I understand that many people feel nervous about dental visits," to show empathy.

Normalise anxiety: Let them know that dental anxiety is common, and it's okay to feel nervous.

Create a Calm Environment: Soothing atmosphere, mentioning how you will control the pace throughout the appointment. Use simple language for explanation and some visual aids. Distraction methods like using earphones.

Advanced communication skills:

Explain how your approach will be: Involving patients in decision making, slowing down and offering breaks, considering oral anxiolysis, reassuring throughout and praising their cooperation.

Plan for Future Visits: If the patient is not comfortable, mention about we want to build trust gradually and that is more important to us. Discussing coping strategies.

- **Vulnerable patients. (Rural/ remote community, Aboriginal community, abuse or suspected abuse, international student as a patient).**

Each group may have unique challenges or barriers to accessing dental care. Here's how to handle these situations with care:

a) Patients from Rural or Remote Areas:

Patients in rural or remote areas have limited access to healthcare and may face unique challenges, such as transportation issues, financial barriers, or long gaps between visits.

Appreciating their travel for healthcare, providing comprehensive care and follow up plans by providing appropriate information about government incentives and provisions within remote or rural areas.

b) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Patients:

Patients from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities often face historical mistrust of the healthcare system, language barriers, and cultural differences that must be respected.

How to approach:

Cultural Competency: Use of Aboriginal Health Workers, respect for Family and Elders, clear and respectful communication. Understanding provisions for the community by the Government.

c) Patients Facing Abuse or Suspected Abuse:

For patients experiencing abuse, it is essential to create a safe and confidential space where they feel comfortable disclosing sensitive information.

How to approach:

Create a Safe Environment, watch and be attentive for signs, being very sensitive in our approach, knowing reporting protocols and building trust.

(offer support and a safe space for future visits. Trust-building may take time with such patients give them all the space).

Advanced communication skills:

d) International Students as Patients:

International students may face language barriers, financial difficulties, lack of social support, or limited understanding of the healthcare system in a foreign country.

- **Language Barriers:** Use simple language and provide multilingual resources, or arrange for an interpreter if needed. Visual aids can also help in explaining dental conditions and treatments.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Be mindful of cultural differences in how health and dental care are approached. Respect any cultural preferences or concerns the patient may have regarding treatment.
- **Insurance and Financial Issues:** Many international students may not be familiar with insurance systems in their new country. Take time to explain the costs of treatment, coverage options, and payment plans.
- **Loneliness and Isolation:** Recognize that international students may feel isolated. Provide reassurance and engage them in a way that makes them feel welcomed and supported.
- **Education and Prevention:** They may not have had regular access to dental care previously, so take time to educate them on oral health practices and preventive care, emphasising how they can maintain their dental health.

(There are no such provisions specially for international students by the Government. But, there could be provisions within the University. Thus, mentioning them to have a word with University student coordinator in terms of any health or dental camps).

Advanced communication skills:

• **Gaining informed consent:**

Gaining informed consent is a crucial part of ethical and legal dental practice. It ensures that the patient fully understands the proposed treatment, its risks and benefits, alternatives, and gives them the autonomy to make a decision about their healthcare. Here are key steps to effectively gain informed consent:

- **Provide Clear and Understandable Information:** Using visual aids and tailor information to the patient's level.
- **Discuss the Risks and Benefits** of the treatment, provide alternatives - risks and benefits of those as well.
- **Ensure Voluntary Decision-Making:** Giving them time to decide, respecting their right to refuse and encouraging them to ask questions.
- **Assess Understanding:** Clarify any misunderstandings and address any special consideration of language barrier, capacity to consent and cultural sensitivity.
- Also mentioning about documentation for the consent.
- Autonomy to take a second opinion.

Table 3-1 Stages in the process of obtaining informed consent

Interactive model	Consent in practice
Making introductions	Greeting patient and introducing oneself
Explaining the dental problem	Identifying problem Explaining problem in jargon-free language
Outlining various treatment options	Identifying treatments from examination and dental knowledge Explaining options simply Check if further explanation is needed
Discussing risks and benefits	Presenting benefits Presenting risks Check if need further explanation
Estimating time and costs	Discussing the issues of time and costs
Inviting questions	Ask for any questions
Reaching mutual understanding	Check if fully understands options and the reasons for choosing selected treatment
Confirming choices and agreement	Draw process to a close and obtain verbal agreement
Indicating consent (written)	Acquire signed consent and place this in patient's notes

Advanced communication skills:

- **Handling demanding patients:**

Dealing with demanding patients in dental practice requires a combination of strong communication skills, empathy, and professionalism.

- Active listening and clear communication.
- Set boundaries: While being empathetic, it's important to maintain clear professional boundaries. Don't over-promise or make guarantees about treatments.
- Empathy, reassurance and offering choices.

- **Handling angry patients, complain and solving patients problems:**

Dealing with angry patients, complaints, and resolving issues in dental settings requires patience, empathy, clear communication, and problem-solving skills. Handling these situations well can de-escalate tension, restore trust, and improve the patient experience.

- Stay calm and professional.
- Listening actively.
- Acknowledge the problem and apologise if necessary.
- Investigate the complaint: Ask clarifying questions or review records.
- Offer solutions and explain next steps.
- Assuring the problem will be looked at and there will be appropriate resolution for the same.

Global Rating

The examiner also gives each candidate an overall score for that task, called a global rating. A candidate can receive one of five global rating grades for their overall task performance: outstanding, pass, borderline, fail or bad fail.

(Each global rating grade relates to a numerical score of 4, 3, 2, 1 or 0 respectively)

So how do we do that? What is it that makes us have a higher rating in this section? The answer is effective communication, by showing the concern and support in a holistic way.

Key areas of global rating:

- Health promotion in an appropriate way.
- Providing support in any way the patient wants. (Professionally).
- Understanding their emotions, expectations and hopes.
- Helping them to understand overall health and how oral health is related.
- Sounding confident and clear.
- Understanding the patient's body language and making sure they are at ease and care is provided.

General rubrics for each case:

- Health promotion and patient motivation.
- Understanding expectations and barriers.
- Cultural or situation sensitivity.
- Patient centred approach.
- Shared decision making or inter collaborative professional decisions.



References

aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2017/0101/p29/jcr:content/root/aafp-article-primary-content-container/aafp_article_main_par.html

https://www.cda-adc.ca/_files/practice/practice_management/patient_communications/guides/dentalguide-ns.pdf

Here are a few videos I would recommend watching:

[Clinical communication skills - Non-verbal communication: consultation - version 1 of 2 \(youtube.com\).](#)

[Clinical communication skills - Non-verbal communication consultation - version 2 of 2 \(youtube.com\).](#)

[Communication Skills: A Patient-Centred Approach \(youtube.com\).](#)

[Say This, Not That: Patient Experience Video \(youtube.com\).](#)

<https://youtu.be/7eOzoR5jIIs?si=mryUDYNFITlxYvNg>

<https://youtu.be/NbYcpDhmSXo?si=lqDmly5OzO3lOo8j>

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