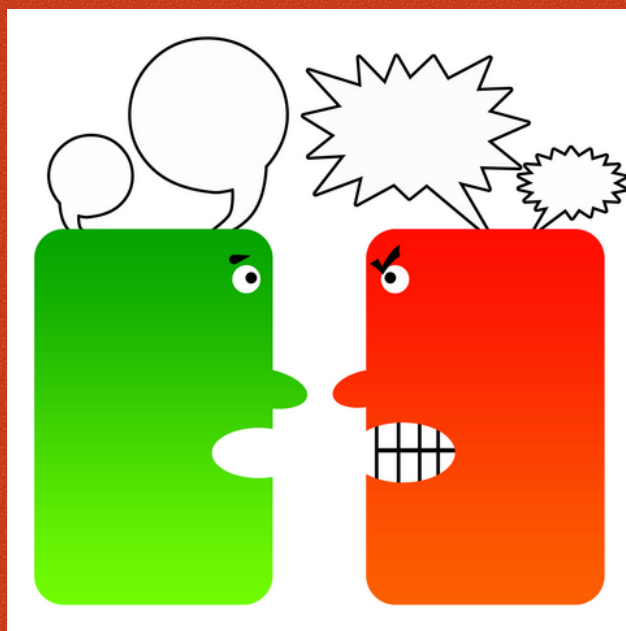
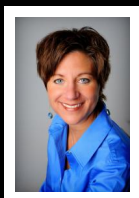


TURN UPSET PATIENTS INTO A PRACTICE ASSET



How to take patients' complaints & turn
them into practice improvement ideas

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Turn Upset Patients into a Practice Asset

How To Manage Upset Patients . . . and turn them into practice improvement ideas, staff training and testimonials for your practice

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About the Author

Jill Nesbitt

Jill Nesbitt, MBA has over 15 years experience handling patient complaints for a 6 dentist private group practice in Ohio. In this multi-specialty group, she has averaged a 78% success in satisfying and maintaining patients in the practice over the past 10 years.

She presented this approach at the Ohio Award for Excellence Quest for Success Conference 2002 in a best practices review. The Quest for Success Conference targets state level Baldrige award winners.

Introduction

Special Report

Hi. This is Jill Nesbitt of www.dentalpracticecoaching.com. Welcome to this special report that I've put together to share with you a new strategy that almost no one is using with their upset patients.

In fact, after applying what I'll teach you, there's a good possibility that you may be the ONLY dentist using this strategy in your local area.

And, even if you are located in a highly competitive area, only a few will be taking the time to use this one.

Here's your chance to separate yourself from the competition.

What I want you to pay particular attention to as you learn this technique and think of ways to apply it yourself is this: how would you want to be treated?

You see, this approach – the way it is approached, delivered and structured

– is a case study in “do unto others you would have others do unto you.”

That's it. Sounds simple, but few dentists turn their feelings into action, even though everyone would agree this is the way they would prefer a personal upset to be handled.

So, as you read through the "steps" for success a bit later in this report, you'll see that this approach outlines an approach that fits how people prefer to be treated, but is revolutionary in practice.

As you read each "step", think about how you can apply these ideas to your own dental practice. In particular, we're going to talk about how to encourage upset patients to tell you their concerns so you can turn around and use these issues to improve your practice.

Remember, the goal here in learning this new concept is simple.

The goal is to help you . . .

- Invite patients to share their upsets with you
- Use this coaching to improve your practice
- Learn to appreciate it when patients complain and
- Reduce your stress level when these situations occur

So, having said that, let's see what you can learn here.

Part 1 – There's no customer service anymore

First of all, let me explain why this new strategy has become necessary.

Patients are going to get upset with dentists. It's inevitable. No matter the clinical quality.

And you can be the only dentist in town who actually turns this to your advantage.

In dental school, you were taught that there will be some patients that, when you see their names in the schedule, make you groan. You may have been told to simply dismiss those patients in an attempt to reduce your stress level since they 'cost more than they are worth'.

This is easier said than done.

Trying to follow this advice leads to a myriad of problems:

1. You don't know how to dismiss a patient.
2. You are forced into a confrontation – telling the patient what they have to do.
3. When you tell a patient they are dismissed, they blame you and tell you how terrible you are – and this skyrockets your stress level!
4. If you dismiss every patient that gets upset, not only does this affect your stress level, it affects your income as well.

Bottom line is: it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep patients happy and coming into your practice regularly, and certainly more difficult to manage your stress level and manage your practice overall.

Does that mean that you should just ignore upset patients and hope they forget about their problem? Of course not!

Don't buy into that kind of limited thinking.

What it means is that YOU must adapt as patient challenges arise. As these patient upsets occur throughout your day, don't just quit and head backwards. Don't you dare give up.

Find a way to tackle these upsets head on. Remember that you are doing the best dentistry you can and every dentist has a patient that complains. By taking responsibility to address the patient's concerns . . . you can continue to move forward.

Downloading this report is a step forward.

What I'm about to talk with you about is a way to accomplish three important things . . .

1. Calm even the most angry patient.
2. Discover opportunities to improve your practice

3. Generate testimonials

Sounds good, huh?

OK, so let's get to it.

What we're going to look at is how to use a system to manage these patients.

My Managing Patient Upsets System has four steps and a bonus (to be revealed at the end of this report)

1. Acknowledge

2. Document

3. Interview

4. Resolution

All successful systems contain a set of detailed procedures formulated to carry out an activity. To make this system effective, you follow each step to reach the final product.

To understand why this new technique is important, let's look at the way most upset patient situations are handled.

Typically, here's how it works. A patient calls your office and makes an offhand comment to your secretary that they are unhappy about something. It could be a grumpy comment scheduling an appointment or a sarcastic comment about the fee for the procedure. The secretary handles the patient as best she can – and then hangs up the phone, happy to get that conversation over with.

And the problems set in.

The secretary doesn't want to upset you, so she doesn't tell you about the negative comments.

The patient feels like he tried to let you know that he has a problem and when he gets no response, he feels ignored. He assumes you know about his problem, but you don't care enough to do anything.

The patient complains to family and friends about how uncaring you are.

What now?

You change your strategy.

You begin to establish a system to handle these situations.

Now, let's see what happens in this new scenario.

A patient makes an offhand negative comment to your secretary. The secretary identifies this person as an upset patient and **starts using your new system**. She acknowledges his feelings and documents the pertinent information. Now the staff person will be interviewed to learn his perspective and identify a potential resolution.

Now what happens?

First of all, it is much more likely that this patient will tell you their concerns. Instead of venting to family and friends and causing bad public relations for your practice, this patient will spend the time with you to help you find out what specific problem occurred. **Reducing bad publicity about you.**

Secondly, you find out about a problem in your practice. If this problem upset one patient, it certainly could upset others. Once you discover what this problem is, you can solve it.

Finally, you create goodwill with this patient that increases the chance of them becoming your patient for life. They also will be so appreciative of you, that they tell family and friends how you helped them – generating additional positive public relations for your practice.

The important thing to note is this: using this strategy works with any upset patient, no matter the circumstances.

Patients upset with scheduling.

Patients upset with treatment outcomes.

Patients upset with staff performance.

You know the challenges in attracting & retaining patients in today's economy. You

know how hard you are working to satisfy your patients, just to have some of them walk out the door and down the street to your competitor.

For now, the Managing Patient Upsets System, is a great way to maintain your patients.

For now, most dental practices are not trained in high level customer service techniques.

For now, you can use this system to beat your competition.

For now . . .

So, while the opportunity still presents itself, let's look at the steps for making this a successful patient retention strategy for you.

There are four of them . . .

Part 2 – Four steps & a bonus

In order to make the most of this strategy, I'm going to walk you through the steps for success.

Once you have this system in place, you can feel confident in your ability to manage patient upsets. Your confidence will quickly spread to your staff who will feel more comfortable knowing what to do when a patient is upset.

As you set up this approach, you need to decide who will be responsible for managing complaints in your practice. I recommend the office manager take this job. She has the most flexible schedule of any staff member or dentist and can respond in a timely and efficient manner.

By using this system and including the bonus tracking, you will be able to evaluate her success and perhaps even use this as an incentive piece of her compensation.

It is very important that all dentists in the practice be familiar with this approach – firstly, to respond quickly to each individual patient complaint and secondly, to be able to use this approach in case of office manager turnover and training.

Step 1 – Acknowledge the patient’s feelings

A natural tendency for staff (and dentists!) is to stay away from an upset patient. The fastest way to clear out extra staff from your front desk is to have a patient voice an upset.

No one wants to step up and get involved.

Having a system eliminates this problem.

You train your staff to look for anyone who seems upset and to acknowledge how the patient feels. A simple “Mr. Jones, you sound like you are getting frustrated with this situation – is that right?” is all it takes to kick off this system.

No specific script is needed for your staff to learn – any hygienist, assistant or secretary can ask a patient if they feel upset, angry or frustrated. The staff person’s job is to identify if the patient feels upset – once the answer is yes, then the office manager steps in.

The staff understand that their job is to follow the steps of this system, knowing what to say initially and then to allow the office manager to take over. By clarifying each team member’s role, you will eliminate the tendency to avoid and ignore upset patients. So, once your staff person acknowledges the upset, she can either go get the office manager or if she is not available, then arrange a time for her to call the patient the next day.

Step 2 – Documentation

So, now you have an upset patient – the staff person’s job is to document on a standard form the basic information. The staff person should write down the patient name, number of years in the practice and contact information. You can request a sample form through my website.. They also write what the upset is about. Then the office manager takes over.

The office manager either meets with the patient right then or calls them later that day. Her initial goal is to clarify the details of the patient’s frustration. The office manager takes notes on a blank notepad and interviews the patient to understand what occurred.

During this interview, the office manager positions herself as the best person to

solve the patient's problem and asks as many questions as needed to allow the patient to vent their emotions and then get on to the business of figuring out what they want to happen to make them feel better.

During this interview, the office manager asks a series of questions.

Start with a general 'Please tell me about your experience'

Use active listening to mirror their feelings. -- "So what I am hearing you say is that first you had a hard time scheduling your appointment and then you had to wait 20 minutes in our lobby – no wonder you are feeling frustrated!"

As the patient describes their experience and the problems that occurred, ask follow up questions where appropriate. Ask for names or descriptions of staff, date and time of day, any details that will help your investigation later.

When it seems like they have told you everything, thank them for describing this incident since it will be really helpful to make things better in the practice – and then ask if there is anything else that has been a problem for them – at any time.

Now, you may be thinking –

Why would I ask them to think about other situations where they have been upset with the practice?

Won't that simply make them even more angry?

Actually, it does the opposite.

If this patient had a problem in the past, they remember it. Most likely, they never talked to you about it.

So, even if you solve this one current problem for them, if you don't go back and find out what other issues they had, you might solve this problem and they still might be upset.

If this is the solitary issue they have had with the practice, then again you win. You can comment, "Hmmm, so you have been coming here for 6 years and overall things have been good for you until now & this situation?"

Confirm how successful you have been at keeping them satisfied.

During this time with your patient, write everything down and thank him for his feedback.

One of the best ways to thank patients is by saying “I can’t fix it if I don’t know something is wrong.

Thanks for helping me.”

Once your patient says “That’s it. Nothing else has been a problem ever.” Now you reflect their list of problems back to them. “So let me make sure I have everything – first, my secretary refused to schedule your appointment at the time you requested, next you had to wait 20 minutes in our lobby and you never received your \$75 refund until you had to ask for it – is that right?”

Use frank, straightforward language.

Don’t pussyfoot around.

If the patient said they were “disgusted” with something, then use that same term in your description back to them.

Using this technique, soon your upset patient will be saying yes and agreeing with you. You are now becoming their ally – someone who really listens and understands how they feel.

Your next step is the key.

Ask the patient “What would you like to happen that would make you feel better?”

Once you ask this, you must wait until the patient speaks next. This may involve some time just sitting and looking at the patient. That is okay. Your job is to give them the space and time they need to think – and not interrupt.

Often, the patient will tell you right away – I don’t want to pay for this appointment or I don’t want to pay my copay. 90% of patient upsets resolve with a financial adjustment of less than \$200.

Sometimes your patient doesn’t know what would make them feel better, and they ask “What would the doctor do?” – always reflect this back to the patient, “Dr. John wants you to feel good about coming here and he is pretty flexible, so this is really up to you – what do you think would be good?”

Occasionally, your patient will ask for the moon – “I want my crown for free!”

Write down whatever they say, reasonable or unreasonable.

When you get an unreasonable request, ask about their plans for continuing care. Does this patient need implants and significant repairs? Will he complete his treatment here? Will he get his prophies here? Will he bring his family back?

Of course, you can only trust what your patient says, but you can evaluate his answers in your best judgment. Some patients may have already made up their minds to leave the practice, no matter the financial accommodation the dentist provides – and they often will tell you so if you ask!

By now, you have enough data to fill out the top of your form and discuss this situation with your doctor.

So, say thanks to the patient for their time and willingness to help the practice improve. Let them know you will review everything with the doctor and get back to them the next day. This is also a good time to confirm phone numbers, email, etc.

Step 3 – Interview the staff person or dentist involved in the patient upset

Once you have summarized the patient’s upset on your form, you will interview the staff person or dentist that was involved.

If the patient was upset by scheduling, find out exactly which secretary handled the appointment.

If the cleaning was rough, find the hygienist.

If the dentist’s crown came off, then talk to him as well.

In fact, a patient may have been upset by multiple staff members and you need to interview everyone involved.

To perform this interview, bring the form and the patient chart to the staff person and let them know they have had a patient complaint.

Review with your staff what the patient’s concerns are.

Give your staff the patient's chart to remember the situation and ask them what happened from their point of view.

Most of the time the staff person will have a different perspective on the situation: Maybe the hygienist ran late that day and blames a doctor for taking a long lunch, maybe a new hire secretary didn't handle the computer correctly.

If upon review, you find that your staff person did make a mistake, then this is a good time for coaching. You can discuss with the staff person how to handle this situation differently in the future, reassure them that they are good at their job and thank them for taking the time to discuss this patient's concern.

Other times, you will discover that your staff did nothing wrong.

They followed every step, even tried to help our upset patient and nothing seemed to make them happy.

This is also a good time for coaching – well, praise actually – “Nice job! You handled this very well and even though this patient is complaining, I appreciate the work you did.”

Just think, you would never have had the opportunity to coach or praise your staff on something this timely and relevant without using this system.

Back to the form.

Write in the staff person's response in the next section.

By now you really understand what happened.

Next step is to review this form with the doctor. He can quickly see the situation and often may have some input on that day and that patient as well.

Now this complaint can be resolved.

Step 4 – Resolution

Often, patient complaints are very straightforward.

A staff person made a mistake, a patient paid for it with their time or money, and some

financial adjustment seems reasonable.

Sometimes these situations are more complex – or the patient has asked for a significant amount of money.

Once the dentist approves the financial adjustment for the patient, then the office manager calls the patient back.

To be responsive to the patient, tell them when you will get back to them – 1-2 days is the norm.

You want this problem resolved and off your list of things to do.

So, call the patient and let them know all the legwork you have done for them:

First, that you talked with the staff person that caused the problem.

Let the patient know how concerned the staff person was; that she did not realize this was causing such a problem and describe her perspective on what happened.

Watch here that your patient doesn't feel they have to defend themselves again, you don't want them getting upset all over again!

Let your patient know that you agree with them. (Meaning that you agree that if you were in their shoes, you would have felt the same way.) Now, you want them to understand that you took the time to look into their concern.

This should elicit a thank you from your patient, as it starts to sink in that you are handling this upset in a professional manner and how unusual (and wonderful!) the practice is.

Next, let your patient know that you also reviewed this situation with the dentist. Tell the patient that the dentist appreciates their time and effort to help us improve the practice.

If appropriate, let the patient know that the dentist agrees, that an adjustment of \$ value seems appropriate.

Next ask, “So, how does that sound?”

Hopefully your patient is happy, thanks you and the dentist and tells you they will pay their portion of the agreed upon amount right away.

A happy patient tells 10 people about a dental practice; an upset patient tells 25 people and a patient who had a complaint that was successfully resolved tells 50 people!

Remember you are building your practice when you take the time to work through this process.

A thought for the doctor and office manager on approving these financial adjustments: consider this expense as training cost.

This is paid staff training.

In fact, I recommend telling the staff person how this patient upset turns out and what the adjustment amount was. This helps your staff to appreciate the dentist and cements their lesson.

You thought I forgot the BONUS, didn't you?

Look at what you're reading here. I've given you over 15 pages of, what I think, is really good information. I think, as you've been reading this, you've realized that this is VALUABLE content that you can begin USING in your own dental practice.

I hope it sounds good to you. And, if it does, I've got more strategies waiting for you at www.dentalpracticecoaching.com. In fact, one of them, my "Managing Dental Insurance Report", will show you how you can stop guessing which insurance plans to join or drop and start making intelligent decisions based on a straightforward financial comparison. I've put together even more strategies to show you exactly how to get your practice running smoothly with well-trained staff.

Now that brings us back to this report and how I use these strategies myself. And, since you have read all the way to the end of this material, I will give you an EXCLUSIVE offer that isn't available for download through my website.

First, I will send you the Patient Complaint form I use in my practice.

Secondly, I will send you a FREE copy of the BONUS material referenced above – "Managing Dental Insurance". It sells for \$35 on my website . . . and it's yours for FREE when you email through my website and reference your purchase of this report.

Conclusion

Turning patient upsets into staff and dentist coaching opportunities is the ultimate public relations key. It is NOT without flaw . . . so, you need to be PROACTIVE in adapting to the ever-changing patient communications in your practice and take steps to solve the problems that arise.

This report is just ONE way to improve your practice management.

There are many others – even BETTER strategies. And you can learn all of them. I hope you've found this information useful and I trust you'll drop by to continue learning how to really smooth out the management of your practice.

Wishing you much success,

Jill Nesbitt