

Images: The key to patient engagement

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “Tell me, I’ll forget. Show me, I’ll remember” and, in dentistry, this could not be more applicable. Dentistry, like many other healthcare fields, can be very technical and often difficult for the untrained to comprehend. Part of the clinician’s mission is to explain complicated issues in a way that patients will understand, to ensure that when they leave practice, they know exactly what they need to do to improve their oral health.

The problem is that it is often difficult for patients to fully understand what they are being told. No doubt you have tried to explain a treatment to a patient only to be met by a blank look. This shouldn’t be surprising – most patients will not have any real exposure to clinical matters let alone dentistry – but it is important. Being sure that patients fully understand about their key treatment plan is crucial - informed consent is not something that should ever be overlooked.

To this end, it is important for dental professionals to find better ways of explaining what they see and communicating treatment plans to patients. One approach that is becoming more popular in modern dentistry is the use of visual mediums in the dental surgery. Just as our Chinese proverb suggests, visual teaching is far more effective than simply conveying information through speech. Indeed, by being able to show someone evidence of previous examples or better still a zoomed picture of their own teeth, their understanding, and critically their compliance will be greater.

Many clinician’s now use a digital camera in the surgery to photograph their patients’ teeth so that they can be viewed on a screen placed around the chair. This is a quick and simple way for practitioners to show patients their own teeth from a different perspective and allows them to explain issues clearly and plan treatments more accurately.

Digital radiography is also helping dentists to explain complicated dental issues to their patients in a way that was simply not possible with traditional methods. Indeed, most modern X-ray systems will digitise the scan instantaneously and then make it available for immediate review. When shown on a large screen near the patient this is an incredibly powerful aid to communicating exactly what is wrong – and critically enables a more informed discussion about what treatments will help provide the best result. What’s more, due to the way in which digital images can be shared, patients can be sent their X-ray or scan for no cost, meaning they can take the image away for their own information.

Building on this we now have in practice digital scanners to aid with diagnosis, patient education and understanding. In orthodontics, for example, a full mouth scan can be taken using a modern scanner within minutes, allowing the clinician to show the patient a digital representation of their entire dentition in real time. This can then be manipulated immediately to highlight problem areas and, with certain software, visualise the predicted outcome on the screen – giving patients an accurate sense of what their teeth will be like once the treatment has been completed.

Other new technologies are being developed that enable unprecedented visualisation; digital occlusal analysers are available to show patients the exact nature of their occlusion, periodontal probes display charting information and can be used to explain periodontal issues – in fact, digital and visual technology are helping improve the standard of care across many fields in dentistry. But there are still some gaps.

Take dental caries, for instance. The main issue with this incredibly pertinent disease – which is believed to affect at least 30 per cent of the UK's population¹ – is that it is notoriously difficult to see and therefore identify - at least in its most reversible, early stage. By the time the majority of practitioners are able to see the tell-tale signs of the active demineralisation, it is usually too late for anything but restorative treatment. This problem is compounded by the difficulty professionals have to engage patients at this early reversible stage if they cannot show them any evidence of what to look out for.

CALCIVIS has spent 5 years developing technology to eliminate this problem. With its unique imaging system, CALCIVIS can accurately identify active demineralisation, at its earliest and most reversible stage and provide a highly engaging visual image to aid in patient education and implementation of a preventive oral health regimen.

By being able to show patients exactly what the issue is, it is possible for practitioners to provide evidence-based advice that make a real difference to the way patients perceive their own oral health.

For more information visit www.calcivis.com

¹ Oral Health Foundation: National Smile Month, Facts and Figures. Link: <http://www.nationalsmilemonth.org/facts-figures/>
[accessed 19/04/17]