

Principles

2. Patient Communication & Treatment Planning

- You are the doctor. Conduct a dental exam and diagnosis, not just a “check-up”. Be the focus, not the afterthought of the recall appointment.
- Watch for systemic illnesses and signs of domestic violence.
- Explain what you are doing, and looking for, during the oral exam in friendly simple terms. Good communication during the exam, and when explaining your findings, builds rapport and trust in you as a health care provider and conveys the value of the service you are providing.
- Be clear on the difference between urgent, necessary, preventive, elective and optional care and any health consequences of having, deferring or declining care. Be confident when explaining costs. Do not delegate this important discussion.
- Provide new patients with a simple written summary of all the options discussed, including cost ranges and not just the most complex option.
- Undertake procedures within your personal scope (knowledge, training and skills). Your personal scope can be updated and increased through continuing education.
- Seek a consultation if you have a concern that treatment may be beyond your skills or comfort level. When appropriate, refer the patient.
- Address and present recommendations to treat your patient’s oral health needs. Do not treatment plan for the purpose of maximizing profits from a patient’s plan maximums — even if requested. If you agree to this approach, it conveys that you sometimes do things beyond what you know your patient needs. (Patients may request unnecessary treatment procedures be provided in order to maximize dental plan benefits.)
- As a health care professional, do not let the patient’s insurance coverage dictate your treatment recommendations. Ensure that the motivation for treatment is the overall oral health of the patient. Document and have patients sign the chart if you propose different treatment recommendations from what the patient chooses. Refuse to do treatment that isn’t in the patient’s best interest.

Principles

- Be honest and consistent in your recommendations, fees and treatment costs for all patients.
- Recognize overall health concerns of the patient (e.g., smoking, drug addiction, signs of diabetes, sleep apnea, changes in cognition, etc.). Suggest that patients consult with their physician and other health care providers to follow up on these concerns. Assist the patient to seek help, if requested (e.g., referral for smoking addiction).

Billing

- Dental offices are encouraged to assist patients in understanding their dental insurance benefits. Ensure the patient understands their responsibility for the full cost of all dental care including what portion may or may not be covered by their dental insurance. The dental plan is a contract between the patient, the insurer and their employer or benefits provider. It is not a contract with the dentist.
- Ensure that all dental insurance claims accurately reflect the work completed. Document that you have made every effort to collect the full amount of all dental fees charged including the co-payment.
- Ensure that you use the correct codes from the NSDA Suggested Fee Guide that accurately reflect the treatment you are providing.
- If you accept assignment and discount your fee for an insured patient, the amount submitted to the insurance company must reflect the overall discounted amount. Discounting only the co-pay amount is fraudulent.

Actions

for Patient Communication & Treatment Planning

- Ensure your office staff always communicates in a friendly, relaxed and respectful manner; and that new patients are not immediately greeted with a question about their dental coverage. If you make their first contact with your office about money, they will do likewise.
- A best practice is to allow enough time in your day to greet your patient by name before they start their hygiene appointment (ensure your patient knows you are the dentist). Likewise, try to see the patient after his/her hygiene appointment. If the patient is there for an exam, he/she is there to see you — don't become the afterthought of the appointment. Advise what you will be doing during this appointment, (e.g., an annual exam, starting treatment). Convey a calm, friendly demeanor as a caring health care professional. Identify each step of your exam.
- Be polite and be respectful to your staff, patients and colleagues at all times.
Before you comment on the work of another dentist, think of how you would like to be referenced in the same circumstance. When possible, discuss this with the other dentist.
- Listen to your patient's chief complaint. Explore history, symptoms, and expectations (wishes and needs). See, smell, touch, listen.
- Use appropriate aids, (e.g., radiographs and oral photography), to conduct the oral exam and to communicate your findings. Use plain language. If you're discussing a complex treatment option, use active listening skills — have your patient paraphrase what you've said to ensure you have been understood. Do not expose the patient to unnecessary radiographs.
- Communicate primarily with your patient (not your staff) during the exam for the comfort of your patient. Focusing on them and letting them know what you're doing; looking for; or seeing in simple terms and in a relaxed manner helps patients know that you are conducting a health examination; not just checking on the work of your hygienist.
- Have empathy and understanding when communicating your treatment recommendations. Present all treatment options including the option of no treatment. Cover any associated risks of having, deferring or declining treatment. Stress the health benefits of regular dental exams and care.
- Congratulate patients for their good oral health when appropriate — be encouraging, not scolding.
- Take time to ensure your diagnosis and treatment plan is clearly communicated and accurately documented in your patient's record. Include your recommended order of care, (e.g., urgent, necessary, preventive, elective and optional care) and your patient's decision regarding treatment.
- Ensure you review the estimated cost range of your treatment options (including lab fees or that there will be lab fees). Do not delegate this important discussion. Details of the patient's plan coverage and specific payment options are appropriately covered by your office staff.
- Ensure the treatment plan chosen by your patient meets the test of informed consent and that you have permission to proceed.
- An essential policy is to schedule a separate "Initial Exam" with the dentist provider. You are the director. The time allocated will allow a thorough initial examination, required radiographs and other diagnostic procedures to be completed. Office staff should indicate that it is office policy for the dentist to complete an initial exam before any treatment, including hygiene care, is initiated. Scheduling may allow this treatment to commence on the same day. "Emergency Only" patients may be exempt from an Initial Exam policy because they are seeking emergency care.