

# A five star experience: part one

In the first of three articles, **Ashish B Parmar** explains how a patient should be looked after on the first visit

New patients are vital for the success of any dental practice. It is important to have a carefully planned marketing strategy to attract the right type of new patients. This is the first in a series of articles that explains the 'new patient journey' from the moment the patient first walks into the practice. I have successfully used this system in private practice for many years.

The treatment co-ordinator (TCO) plays a vital role in all the stages of the new patient experience so it is essential to have a highly trained staff member to carry out this role.

## Before the first visit

The initial phone call needs to be handled very well. I recommend regular team training and role-playing so that every team member is excellent

at taking new patient phone calls. Patients that potentially want bigger treatments such as smile design or implants will almost certainly 'shop around' by phoning a number of practices. Your team has only one opportunity to impress!

After the first consultation appointment has been made, the TCO will send a new patient pack, which includes a welcome letter to confirm the appointment, a practice brochure, a medical history questionnaire, a self addressed envelope (for the return of the completed medical history document), and a business card. At the end of this phone conversation, the TCO should say something along these lines:

'Sarah, I am going to be sending you some information about our practice. We want you to know more about us

before your first appointment. You will also receive a text message on your mobile phone to confirm your appointment a few days before the actual appointment. Also Sarah, is there any particular drink you would like us to have ready for you when you arrive? Is there anything else I can help you with? I will send you a detailed medical and dental questionnaire that I would like you to fill out as soon as possible and return it for my attention in the self addressed envelope that will be sent to you. This is very important as we need all these details to help care for you in the best way. Please take your time to complete this well. It has been really nice speaking to you and I am really looking forward to meeting you. If you have any queries or questions, do not hesitate to call me at the practice.'

## On the day of the first visit

The TCO should be really well prepared to receive the new patient 15 minutes before the actual appointment. When the new patient walks in to the practice, the TCO should stand up, walk to the patient and greet him or her with a warm handshake, a nice smile and eye contact. The first impression has to be very good. The TCO could say something like:

'Hi, you must be Sarah? Welcome to our practice. It is really nice to meet you. Please come and have a seat.'

The TCO then asks the patient to fill out a simple questionnaire to find out more about their goals, concerns and past dental experiences. After this, the TCO will take the new patient on a practice tour and introduce them to any staff members along the way. The patient is then taken to the consultation room where their preferred drink would be waiting.

With the patient, the TCO would then review the answers to the questionnaire and find out more about what the patient is mainly concerned about.

It is important to ask pertinent questions such as:

- How can we help you?
- How long has this been bothering you?
- How has that affected you?
- Have you tried any cosmetic treatment in the past?
- How did that work for you?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you rate your smile? (10 would be a perfect smile say like Julia Roberts, and 0 would be not a nice smile at all)
- Imagine you had a beautiful, natural smile... what would this mean to you?
- May I just ask, why now?
- So let me recap – your goals are XYZ.

The most important things to you are ABC. Is that correct?

Also, review the past dental history and review any phobias the patient may have.

A good TCO will ask the right questions and then actively listen. It is also important to discover what is/are the main motivating factors for the

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patient i.e. time, appearance, health, function, pain-free dentistry.

The other important goal at this stage is to build an excellent rapport and find out as many facts about the patient's social history as possible. In life, people buy from someone when they like them and when they trust them. Relationship building is vital.

Once the TCO has conducted the initial interview, they will call the dentist and explain briefly – in private – the main findings, for example:

- A/B/C category of patient and the personality type (DISC system)
- Hot buttons
- Patient's biggest concerns for not having treatment (e.g. cost, fear, etc)
- Whether the comprehensive dental assessment appointment has been explained fully and the quote given
- Patient's budget.

The TCO should then introduce the dentist to the new patient in the consultation room. Suggested verbal skills for this are:

'Sarah, this is Dr Parmar. Dr Parmar, this is Sarah' – the dentist greets the patient with a handshake and will then say to call them by their first name (this breaks down barriers).

The TCO then repeats the main information about the patient's concerns to the dentist – this shows that the TCO has listened to the patient.

'So Ash, Sarah has come along today – she has been very nervous about coming as she had a really bad experience as a child. She had to have an injection, which was extremely painful for her. I have explained how injections are painless here. I have also explained about the powerful numbing gel and the warm local anaesthetic that

we will be using and I think Sarah now feels a bit more at ease regarding this. Her concerns with her smile are really her front teeth and the gaps she has in-between them. She would like a lovely smile like Julia Roberts as her smile is also very narrow. At the same time, she would like to improve the colour. Sarah has seen you on *Extreme Makeover* and she really wants you to help her as she is very conscious of her smile, so a confidence boost would be great for her right now in her life. I've brought you in as I have told her that you are the person to help her with all of her concerns.'

As a dentist, my main goal at this stage is to 'connect' with the patient, build up a rapport and give the patient a genuine compliment. I check if the patient has any specific questions that the TCO may not have covered yet.

Otherwise, I would leave the consultation room and let the patient know that I look forward to meeting them next time for the full dental assessment.

Once the dentist has left the room, the TCO should compliment the dentist straight away:

'He is very passionate about helping people and changing peoples' lives. As a team, we get tremendous job satisfaction working with Dr Parmar.'

This genuine compliment from the TCO about the dentist will affirm to the patient they are making a good decision in coming to the practice for dental care. The TCO then asks the patient if they have any more questions. If not, then the full assessment appointment (1.5 hours in our practice) is scheduled. The estimate for this is signed and the full fee is collected as a pre-payment. A further case presentation or consultation appointment (for about 30-45 minutes) is also booked no more than one week later.

If the TCO is trained in radiography, then once the dentist has had a look in the mouth and prescribed the X-rays required, the relevant X-rays can be taken as well as the preoperative digital photographs and also the joint vibration analysis record (this is equipment that we use to assess the temporomandibular

joints). All this saves the dentist time and is useful diagnostically before the patient's next visit. The patient is then bid farewell.

After the appointment, all the notes taken are updated on the patient's records on the computer (we use Software of Excellence), including the medical history form and the dental questionnaire. This is a priority for the TCO at this stage.

## Photography

The TCO should take a full series of preoperative digital photos. Perfect pictures are needed; an assistant is required for the occlusal photographs and the teeth also need to be dry i.e. no saliva pooling.

The photographs are then downloaded.

The digital images can be made much sharper by doing image sharpening and colour correction on Adobe Photoshop. A PowerPoint can then be created of the patient's photographs ready for the full assessment appointment.

A copy of the patients' photos are also saved on a CD-ROM and kept in the patient's notes.

This is useful for laboratory communication, as well as a back up.

## Summary

This first article explains how a patient should be looked after on the first visit, which is often a complimentary initial consultation. Once the patient is impressed with the practice, he or she will have no hesitation in booking the important full assessment appointment with the dentist. Sometimes, if the initial phone conversation goes really well, the full fee for the dental assessment

can be collected by credit card and the patient's first appointment will then be for about 2.5 hours – 1 hour in the TCO diary (i.e. the initial interview) and then 1.5 hours with the dentist.

Part two of this series of articles, which will be published in the November issue of *Private Dentistry*, will explain the role of the dentist and TCO in treatment planning and preparation for the actual case presentation appointment. [PD](#)

## Comments to [pd@fmc.co.uk](mailto:pd@fmc.co.uk)

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