

Presenting Elective Dentistry

Dear Dianne,

I am a general practitioner in the Northeast, and I've practiced dentistry for 20 years. During the past 10 years, I have devoted considerable time and expense in developing my skills in cosmetic dentistry.

My problem is that of my three hygienists, only one seems interested in promoting my cosmetic services. I have talked to them as a group and shared with them my wishes, but it does not seem to change things. We track which provider presents treatment and when that treatment is scheduled. I've found that 80 percent of cosmetic treatment is sold by one hygienist. How can I get my other two hygienists involved in talking about and promoting cosmetic dentistry?

*Sincerely,
Harriet*

Dear Harriet,

I suspect that the two hygienists who are not presenting treatment feel uncomfortable doing so. Most likely, they need to develop verbal skills in this area. They need to be thoroughly familiar with the procedures you do and know what benefits there are for patients. They also need to understand how to approach the subject and proceed with conversations related to elective dentistry.

You did not mention if you have intraoral cameras available to your hygienists. In my experience, a good communicator becomes a great communicator with an intraoral camera. There's no better way to show a patient the problems that exist and naturally enter into options for improvement. All of your hygienists should be thoroughly skilled in its use and have sufficient time allotted during appointments to talk with patients about dentistry.

Hygienists become products of their environments, and much of their treatment philosophy comes from how their doctors practice. The continuum can stretch from ultra conservative to super aggressive in treatment planning. My first practice experience was with a progressive doctor who wanted his hygienists to promote his dentistry by selling crowns and bridges. My next practice experience was with a doctor who was extremely conservative in treatment planning. This doctor did not want hygienists to sell crowns. In fact, there were a few occasions when I told patients their broken teeth needed crowns, only to have the doctor tell the patients, "No, we can fill this tooth and get a few hundred more miles out of it." At first, it was practice culture shock for me until I learned how the doctor practiced.

There are all kinds of practices. Some doctors are content to just do good ole basic bread-and-butter dentistry. Other doctors steer their practices toward cosmetics, orthodontics, treating craniofacial pain, holistic dentistry, and the like. Maybe your hygienists have not had an opportunity to work in a cosmetic practice. Have your hygienists watched you work with a cosmetic patient? Have they watched you prep a case and carry it to completion? Or do they just get to see the final products? Further, does either of them need cosmetic dentistry or bleaching? What about a family member? I can't think of a better way to make a missionary than to do a case for free or at a reduced rate for a staff member's close family member. The point is, a hygienist must be sold before he or she will promote you.



Dianne Glasscoe

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Is the hygienist's personality a factor? Some people are naturally gregarious and enjoy talking with patients about almost anything. Others are introverted and find it hard to strike up and carry on conversations. They are content to sit and work quietly and only speak when spoken to by patients. Nevertheless, even an introvert can become an effective marketer if given the right verbal skills.

Verbal skills

Your best referrals come from satisfied patients who show off the beautiful cosmetic dentistry you have done for them. Those patients come to you primed and ready to improve their smiles. Hygienists only need to affirm and support them and you.

More than likely, you are concerned about the patients in your practice who have treatment plans that have not been scheduled or patients who could benefit from some type of elective dentistry if someone presented it to them.

Good verbal skills are critical. Patients who feel pressured or hard sold likely will leave your practice. In preparation, find out how patients feel about their oral health and smiles. The best way to do that is with a few brief smile assessment questions on medical histories.

- ① Is there anything about your smile you would like to change?
- ② Are you happy with the color of your teeth?
- ③ Do you have any missing teeth that you would like replaced?
- ④ Are you interested in the latest innovations for attaining beautiful teeth?

"Mrs. Jones, you indicated that you are not happy with the color of your teeth. Could I share with you how we might enhance or whiten them?"

Asking patients' permission to proceed with discussions related to cosmetic dentistry is important. Avoid any inference (especially with female patients) that patients' teeth are unattractive.

"Mrs. Jones, Dr. _____ does a procedure called veneers for people who would like to enhance what Mother Nature gave them. Would you be interested in seeing some pictures of her cases?"

If a patient says OK, proceed with the conversation. What are the benefits to the patient?

"The great thing about veneers is that they won't stain like regular bonding or white fillings"

"Having those teeth replaced will improve your ability to chew...."

"Having those missing teeth bridged will allow you to get rid of your partial, which will help your gums. You will be amazed how much more comfortable you will be, and you won't have to remove it to clean it. It's almost like having your natural teeth back."

"You know, I've been seeing you now for five years. You've certainly come a long way with your oral health since we started. I was wondering why we haven't done those crowns the doctor recommended some time back. Why is that?"

If the reason is financial, a response could be, "Well, if there were a way for you to pay over time, would you be interested in learning about that?"

Hopefully, your practice offers extended payments with an outside financing source such as CareCredit®.

Communicating your desires to hygienists

Do you conduct performance evaluations with each staff member? This would be the ideal time for you to discuss your concerns privately. You can do it in a discreet, non-confrontational way.

"Sarah, you do fine work here, and I appreciate the care and concern you show our patients. There is one area in which I would like to see improvement, and that is in talking with patients about needed dentistry. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to hear my staff members promoting what we do here. We have many patients that need dentistry but maybe need just a little encouragement to proceed. How do you feel about discussing elective treatment? Is there a reluctance on your part to do that, and if so, can you tell me why?"

Then give the hygienist an opportunity to share concerns. You can't solve a problem until the problem is exposed. Maybe you need to role play to help each feel more comfortable presenting treatment. Take turns being the patient and the clinician. Possible scenarios could be:

- ① the patient who needs bridgework to replace missing teeth;
- ② the patient with yellowed teeth who could benefit from bleaching;
- ③ the patient interested in veneers;
- ④ the patient needing full-mouth reconstruction; and
- ⑤ the patient with periodontal disease.

Also, I recommend you track the dollar amount of treatment presented and actually scheduled for each of your hygienists. This gives you and hygienist a way to measure effectiveness in treatment presentation.

Hygienist			
Date	Amount Tx presented	Amount Tx scheduled	Date of first appointment

Future hiring decisions should include finding friendly candidates who answer open-ended questions with candidness and sincerity.

No one is better suited or in a better position to promote dentistry than you, so do not abdicate that responsibility solely to staff members.

Staff members who happily and enthusiastically promote elective dentistry, however, must be comfortable in doing so, be interested in helping people, possess a thorough understanding of the procedures, and possess the right verbal skills. It is your challenge as the leader to meet all these requirements. You must lead the way.

Best wishes, Dianne ■