

Exploration of Patient Communication in General Dental Practice Melbourne (Australia)

Mrs Darina Nirmalann (PhD candidate)
Prof Clare Delany, Prof Rodrigo Marino,
Dr Rebecca Wong

Department of Medical Education
& Melbourne Dental School
The University of Melbourne



Introduction

There is a recognised need for effective patient communication in clinical dental encounters to enable Patient-Centred Care (PCC) and improve patient outcomes. Although dentist-based communication literature has focused on the importance of patient involvement in matters relating their dental health, and shared-decision making (SDM)^{1,2,3,4} there are limited studies that explore the realities of day-to-day practice and the potential barriers to enacting ideal models of patient communication. There are few ethnographic studies in dentistry, which involve direct observations of patient-dentist interactions and very few studies have critically analysed how established healthcare communication models, theories and techniques translate into the dental care context.^{5,6} This research explores communication between dentists and patients in everyday practice. It examines how dentists describe the communication that occurs, what they think is important and what they are trying to achieve in communicating with patients.

Methods

1. Ethnographic methods of **observation** were used to document routine communication occurring in dental practice
2. In-depth semi-structured **interviews** were conducted with participating dentists.

Participants were 27 dentists working across a variety of public and private dental clinics in metropolitan and rural regions of Victoria (Australia). A total of 66 dental appointments were observed and audio recorded. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Conclusions

This research highlights some unique features about the dentist-patient communication and challenges dentists face in implementing patient communication models and theories into practice. To compensate for patients feeling uncertain, anxious and distrusting, dentists have to work hard at managing patient expectations and negative perceptions, increasing patient satisfaction, building trust in a short space of time, putting patients at ease and building relationships. Some dentists are confident and purposeful in their approaches to manage patient expectations and work to build trust through specific communication strategies. Others find this a challenge, lacking knowledge in communication skills shown to be most effective, such as active listening and empathy. The findings have implications for dentist education and for the specific type of communication work required in dental practice in order to achieve Patient Centered Care.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the dentists, their staff & patients for welcoming me to their clinics to perform this research. Thank you to my husband for believing in me & providing emotional support, especially during COVID19.

Disclosures

- Research part of a PhD Melbourne University
- No known conflict of Interest
- Self-funded research

Objectives

This research aims to qualitatively explore both barriers and affordances to dentist-patient communication via observation of everyday practice and by examining dentists' perceptions and understanding of therapeutic communication.

Thesis Research Questions:

- How do dentists describe & implement patient communication in daily practice?
- What factors influence dentist-patient communication from the dentists' perspectives?

Results

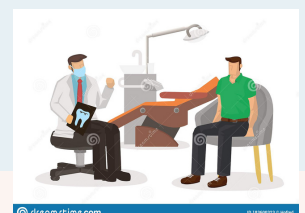
Two key themes emerged about dentists' broader goals when communicating with their patients; their desire to build a connection with the patient and their need to control the communication agenda. Deeply engraved in these themes is their view of their role as a dentist, with expert knowledge and skills, and the need to take care of their patient. Barriers to dental communication as perceived by dentists were categorised as patient factors and environmental factors.

Factors Influencing Patient Communication: PATIENT FACTORS

- Patient Expectations of Dental Visit
- Patient Perception of Dentist's Role
- Negative Perceptions of Dentists (fear & mistrust)
- Patient view of dental treatment as Elective/Not Essential/Not Urgent
- Dental diseases are not visible to patient & often asymptomatic

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

- Invasion of Personal Space
- Uncomfortable Environment
- Invasive Procedures
- The dental chair
- PPE (masks, glasses, gloves, loupes)



References

1. Lanberg, E.M., et al, Development of the concept of patient-centredness – A systematic review, 2019. 102. P. 1228–1236.
2. Ayn, C., et al, Determining Recommendations for Improvement of Communication Skills Training in Dental Education: A Scoping Review. Journal of Dental Education, 2017. 81(4): p. 479–488.
3. Broder, H.L., et al, Communication Skills in Dental Students: New Data Regarding Retention and Generalization of Training Effects. Journal of Dental Education, 2015. 79(8): p. 940–948.
4. Mills, I., et al, Patient-centred care in general dental practice – a systematic review of the literature. BMC Oral Health, 2014. 14(1): p. 1–13.
5. Alsulamy, N., et al, What Influences the Implementation of Shared Decision Making: An Umbrella Review. Patient Education and Counseling, 2020. 103(12): p. 2400–2407.
6. Asa'ad, F., Shared decision-making (SDM) in dentistry: A concise narrative review. J Eval Clin Pract, 2019. 25(6): p. 1088–1093.