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Oral Health Articles

The good vibes that come from empowered patients and fewer dental procedures.

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As dental professionals, we understand that the 1-2 hours per year we see our patients are much less impactful on their oral health than how they care for themselves during the other 8,758 hours.

Patients who expect good oral health outcomes by visiting their dentist for checkups and skipping the homework are similar to someone expecting to get strong by asking a personal trainer to lift weights for them.

I'm into my third decade of practice, and despite making most of my income from fixing or treating the end of the disease process, it brings me no joy to give people a list of things that are wrong and a quote for how much it will all cost. Then comes the part where we need to do the work, address any anxiety, discuss finances, handle challenging technical procedures, navigate difficult access,

imperfect success rates, and manage a range of negative emotions.

When patients say they had a good experience at the dentist, they typically mean it wasn't awful, or not as terrible as they had anticipated. We can be gentle, thorough, skillful, and kind, even entertaining, but there are a thousand places they would rather spend their time and money.

What patients LOVE is receiving praise for great home care, excellent oral hygiene, a clean mouth free of food debris and bacterial plaque, and gums that don't bleed. Even better is when this improvement results from their implementing your advice from their last visit and developing good habits. From the dentist, hygienist, or therapist perspective, this pride is equivalent to a parent, coach, teacher, or trainer moment—the graduation into self-sufficiency, the release of a dove. The swag and smug feeling people get when they are confident and in control is joyous!

Unfortunately, dental professionals aren't able to give out praise as much as they would like! And it would be incorrect to assume that it's entirely their responsibility. Dentists are trained primarily as technicians, not as detectives, investigators, motivational speakers, educators, care planners, and behavior change experts. It's much easier to just do a filling than to engage in a long conversation where the patient may not be listening intently and taking it all in.

Hygienists and therapists do a much better job of this but also face similar challenges. They may or may not feel supported by their dentist colleagues or by insurance item codes, which in many cases don't value oral health education at all. They might also feel overwhelmed, fatigued, or simply run out of time.

But we must try! From my perspective, when patients genuinely take charge of their own oral health, it is a tremendous relief. I feel great for them, and to be honest, it alleviates some of the responsibility I feel for their outcomes.

If you practice for a long time and see your patients over many years, it can feel discouraging to observe the same poor oral hygiene, the need for more complex restorative work, or worsening periodontal disease and tooth loss.

Along with developing the Amelo preventive care platform, I have made it a point to put energy and conversation into patient empowerment and self-determination.

The premise is that I don't want my patients to simply accept their situation of having ongoing, recurring dental disease. "Another two fillings to do this visit, sir?"

If you take the time to help patients understand why they have a higher risk profile, then you can provide education, advice, and products that can help mitigate these factors. It requires being thoughtful, curious, and nonjudgmental. It also requires tact and a relationship built on trust and the principle that you are partnering with them to improve their health. Some people may be

embarrassed about their diet, medications, or their lack of time for healthy habits. The list of possible explanations is extensive.

Once your patients have the right information and an understanding of why they require regular dental work, they are likely much more empowered to take ownership.

The shift from patients feeling dependent, expecting you to problem-solve for them, to one of true collaboration with prevention is profound. There is truly a good vibe and comradery when this momentum builds.

At Amelo, we are working hard to make risk assessment, education, care planning, and product recommendations simple and automated. Our goal is to replace the tedious and complex with evidence-based information, providing a tremendous tool to engage with patients and support them. This is especially important for high-risk groups such as those with special needs and the aging.

I'd love to hear from other dental professionals about their positive experiences empowering their patients.

Release the doves!