

Patients from Mars, Patients from Venus – Gender Differences in the Dental Office

Okay, so it's not politically correct. But, show me a dentist who fails to understand the not-so-subtle differences between male and female patients, and I will show you a spectacularly unsuccessful practitioner.

These gender differences manifest themselves in various ways. For example, even though society is rapidly changing, it is indisputable that a very large majority of our optional, esthetic dental procedures are performed for female patients.

Not all stereotyping is evil. If your assistant would tell you that a patient had remarked upon how the beige shading in the reception room wall coverings greatly enhanced the tones of the emblem in the center of the inlaid floor, would you assume that patient was male or female? Your obvious assumption would be based upon your prior experiences that have convinced you that females are more apt to notice subtle details.

How is this information useful to us?

The Treatment Plan Consultation

You've just completed a complex case presentation. You've carefully described the patient's current status, shared your concerns about the

negative consequences of inaction, and clearly explained the procedures necessary to restore the patient's function and esthetics. The patient is ready and able to proceed, but frets, "This sounds painful."

Your body language and facial expression exude confidence as you reassure the patient that you will minimize any treatment discomfort. You attempt to seal the deal by patting the patient's elbow, smiling encouragingly, and concluding, "Sometimes, you have to suffer to look beautiful."

Now, if this is a female patient, she is likely to smile knowingly, nod ruefully, and ask the receptionist if she can begin treatment on Wednesday morning.

But, tell a male patient, "You have to suffer to look beautiful," and he is likely to rip off his bib, laugh at you, and stalk out of the room, never to be seen again.

Similarly, if a woman asks, "Is this procedure going to hurt?" it would show poor judgment for a dentist to retort, "Did Derek Jeter worry about pain when he crashed into the 3rd base seats to catch that foul ball in the Yankees-Red Sox series?"

Memory Linkages

Perhaps it's the synaptic junctions, perhaps it's the neural transmitters, but more likely it's social conditioning.

Have you ever noticed how men and women differ in creating memory linkages? Perhaps this dental scenario will sound familiar. You're studying a new patient's radiograph and ask, "Do you remember when you had this root canal treatment?"

Ask a female patient and she's likely to respond, "Why yes, doctor. It was September 2000, right before my sister's engagement party."

A male patient is more likely to recall that, "It was right after the Yankees beat the Mets in the World Series," or, "It was when I traded in my Buick for the Honda."

When it comes to memories of dental procedures, women will often remember events by linking them to a family event; men, to sports or cars.

Maintaining that Smile

You're recommending take-home bleaching to your patient, and are explaining that, following active treatment, a simple, one-time, at-home, "booster" application every three to six months would help maintain the new, bright and beautiful smile.

You would like to proceed with impressions, but the patient is skeptical about the at-home maintenance regimen.

If you're dealing with a female patient, a successful explanation would be, "Blonds understand that every so often a touch-up is needed."

But, tell that to a male, and he'll likely respond, "Uh, I'll have to think about that, doc."

Instead, you might wish to tell the male patient, "Doesn't your car need a periodic oil change?" But, mention an oil change to the female, and she'll demur, "Yech, sounds greasy. I'll have to think about that."

Working with Dental Assistants

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, dentists need to understand that female patients tend to be much cattier toward our dental assistants.

Picture the following. A relatively inexperienced, young dental assistant is taking radiographs and is fumbling nervously. How do our male and female patients react?

Our female patients will coldly look the assistant up and down and ask icily, "Have you ever done this before?"

Our male patient might also look the assistant up and down, but is more apt to sooth, "That's okay, honey. Take your time."

All in the Family

Our hygienists shared their observations on the subject.

“I love watching married senior citizens enter the treatment room together,” recalled Camille. “It’s so cute. When the woman is the patient, the husband invariably trails behind her, dutifully carrying her purse,” she noted.

“And,” added Susie, “when we update an elderly gentleman’s medical history, it’s always the wife who will know exactly what the drugs, dosages, and current conditions are. Vice-versa? Never.”

In a neighborhood family practice, parents will often send in their children, unaccompanied by an adult.

“When you call the parents after the child’s visit,” warned Helen, “insist on speaking to the mother and not the father. If you speak to the father, no one in the household will ever remember what the post-op instructions are, or if the child needs a follow-up visit.”

Feedback

A happily married man has been conditioned to recognize the not-so-subtle warning tone when a wife asks rhetorically, “Is that what you’re going to wear?” or, “Is that what you’re going to eat?”

Not being an expert on the subject of nuances of difference between men and women, I showed this article to my wife, Fredi.

Fredi, who, besides being my wife, has been my office manager, best friend, and harshest critic for the past 34 years, listened silently as I read the article to her.

After a few moments she asked, “Is that what you’re going to write?”