

How you fit in the big health-care picture

Here's how patients perceive their dentist compared with other health-care providers.

Have you ever wondered how your patients would rate you compared with their physicians? Would it surprise you to learn that your patients prefer you in just about every way

except your fees?

Last year, we (Suzanne Boswell Presentations) randomly polled 444 patients across the country to see how they perceived both types of practices. You may recall seeing some of their answers in a previous column ("Poll gauges patients' dental IQ," June 2002).

This month, we'll explore in greater depth how patients perceive their dentists and physicians. In particular, we'll look at how they perceive the value of service each practitioner provides, especially in relation to fees. The chart on page 19 provides a thumbnail of the results.

In general, patients saw the dental practice in a more positive light than they saw the medical practice, par-

ticularly when it came to office staff. Their comparisons of the practitioners themselves were more closely aligned. Fifty-seven percent of respondents indicated that they had "high trust" in both their dentists and physicians, although dentists were rated as slightly better listeners (58 percent positive response rate) than physicians (54 percent positive response rate). Perception of clinical care in the dental office earned a rating of seven percentage points higher than the medical practice.

In fact, dental practices earned similar or slightly higher marks in all categories but one: reasonableness of fees. Only 29 percent who answered the survey felt that fees in the dental office were reasonable compared with 35 percent who felt the same about their physicians' fees. Granted, both numbers are relatively low, perhaps reflecting patients' widespread discontent with constantly rising health-care costs. But why is the dental practice number lower than medical? The answer may lie in how the patient perceives value.

The patient's conflict

Patients' attitudes are influenced by health-care trends. Here's the gist of the comments we hear from patients about the dental practice:

- "I don't have dental coverage as

part of my health care plan."

- "I have to pay full fee so I'm more demanding of the dental practice than I am of the medical practice."
- "My dental problems may be aggravating, but they are not life-threatening and may not keep me from working. I will put off a dental office visit if my funds are low."

About physicians:

- "Because I have medical coverage, I go to a physician on my plan."
- "I liked the doctor I used to go to, but since that office isn't on my plan, I can't afford to go there anymore."
- "I can't afford to miss work if I don't feel well. I'll put up with the medical (plan) office if I can get the treatment or the prescription to get me functional and back to work. The costs for this service are justified by my remaining functional."

There are many variations on this theme. But the fact remains that patients often perceive medical issues and appointments to be more pressing—they may see fewer alternatives than they do with dental issues. They may not understand the long-term impact of dental neglect and may not correlate dental health with overall health. As a participant in a recent focus group commented: "Even though I don't like the people at the physician's office, I feel they take care of more serious problems than I have at the dentist's office, where the people are much nicer." And another one: "Medical problems can be much more serious than dental problems."



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It seems reasonable to pay more for that.”

According to our survey, patients perceive that the clinical care received in the dental practice is on a slightly higher level than the care received in the medical practice (see item 9 on chart). Yet they trust their doctors equally (chart item 8). Since patients rate the quality of communications and customer service higher in dentistry, perhaps these factors also influence their perceptions of clinical care. If that’s the case, why did patients feel that the fees of the medical practice were more reasonable?

Simple. Patients do not seem to comprehend the importance and benefits of dentistry. It boils down to perception of value: the service received for the dollar paid. If there is no pain, if they can’t see or feel a problem, it becomes more challenging to understand value.

Patients have clear expectations of physicians. They can often describe their problems more effectively to their physician than to their dentist. They expect their physician to wave a magic wand and make the hurt go away. When the pain is alleviated, they place a high value on the treatment received. They are less clear on what to expect of the dentist. If patients are not experiencing pain—or they do not feel they need or want the treatment—they are less likely to place as high a value on dentistry. If they don’t understand the problem, they don’t value the treatment. The fees may seem high for the perceived benefit.

The practice must communicate benefits and value in a way patients understand. The reality, however, is that it’s not happening as effectively or as often as it should. In a 1997 poll, we asked patients, “On what basis do you accept treatment in the dental practice?” In the same poll, we asked dentists, “On what basis do you think patients accept treatment?” Forty percent of the dentists felt that patients accepted treatment because they needed it. This is clearly a practitioner’s viewpoint: When patients understand need, of course they will value and accept treatment. Only 8 percent of the patients indicated “need” as a primary reason for treatment acceptance. The doctors believed they were effectively communicating the need for treatment but patients did not voice the understanding of need.

The bigger challenge is increasing the patient’s understanding of value. That may more easily be communicated through effective relationship management, trust and patient-friendly education.

Creating a sense of value

One effective way to instill an understanding of value is through a treatment coordinator. Having one person with strong interpersonal skills and practice know-how can go

PATIENTS RATE DENTAL AND MEDICAL PRACTICES

	% OF PATIENTS WHO AGREE	
	DENTAL PRACTICE	MEDICAL PRACTICE
1. Front office team is courteous	59	38
2. Clinical team is courteous	63	49
3. Overall, the entire team displays excellent manners toward patients	60	45
4. Team behaves professionally toward each other	56	44
5. Patients are treated with respect in the office	61	48
6. Office runs on time for appointments	41	16
7. Doctor is attentive and listens	58	54
8. Patient places high trust in the doctor	57	57
9. Excellent clinical care is provided by the office	54	47
10. Fees are reasonable	29	35

Source: National Poll, 2002, Suzanne Boswell Presentations

a long way toward building relationships. The treatment coordinator can introduce the new patient to the practice, explain what will be done in the first visit and address the clinical skills of the team and the benefits of treatment. Patients consistently indicate they are more comfortable asking questions of a non-dentist, female team member than they are of the dentist. Because this person is in a non-clinical position, patients view the treatment coordinator as “more like themselves.”

If you consider this alternative, make sure you have the right person in this position. This staff member must have excellent interpersonal and communication skills and be able to relate to all types of patients. She must be service-oriented and recognize that she is a patient advocate within your office. Clinical know-how is an asset. But bear in mind that clinical skills can be taught more readily than interpersonal skills. Find the right people-person first, then provide that person with the clinical education.

Regardless of whether you establish a position of treatment coordinator, every team member must understand his or her part in communicating value to the patient. Plan a lunch meeting or end-of-day brainstorming session to discuss the value of the treatment your office provides and the benefits to patients. If the team doesn’t understand this, it’s going to be next to impossible to convey it to patients. And patients may not grasp the value of the fees they pay. Above all, the communication of value must be genuine and not seen as lip service. At a time when the public is watching finances very closely, it’s imperative that dentists help their patients understand their “fees are reasonable.” □