



Telling The Truth

Telling the truth is often difficult. While the intent may not necessarily be deceit, we can be guilty of withholding truth. Regardless of the intent, the results are the same. Our patients expect us to tell the truth; when we do not, both parties can be harmed.

There are specific areas in dentistry where struggling with honesty can occur. Have you ever had a patient who was hostile, or with whom you felt a relationship tension? When you discovered a specific form of therapy that they clearly needed, did you fail to mention it because you assumed they would have a hostile response? You may have perceived that they did not want to hear about the root canal therapy, the periodontal disease, the crown with recurrent decay (which was placed a few years ago), or the wisdom tooth requiring extraction. In my opinion, the choice to withhold the information based on a presumed response is not being honest, and patients are entitled to full disclosure of their health status. It is quite challenging to tell the truth when we feel that the patient is waiting to shoot the messenger, and this is not unique to dentistry. Some physicians are afraid to tell a patient that he/she has cancer or that cancer is suspected. Who are they trying to protect? Why are we withholding information which is required morally, ethically, and legally? I believe the main reason we withhold information is fear. Other reasons may include incompetence, laziness, or apathy. In the helping/healing professions, I feel that we put ourselves in these ethical binds because of our desire to please people and make them happy. When we do this, we violate our integrity, and in some cases risk causing physical harm to our patient. We need to realize we have no control over another person's happiness, feelings, or reactions.

Telling the truth can involve negative consequences for patients or our relationships with them. Occasionally, we must tell patients that the way they interact with us or our staff is not acceptable. When they break appointments or constantly fail to pay for services, we may say nothing out of fear they will race off to another dentist. It is wrong to ignore these situations and hope they will improve (because generally they do not). The same applies to patients who say hurtful things to us and our staff at every appointment, and we choose to say nothing. We end up dreading to see them come up on the schedule. Just like most dental problems, these things never get better by ignoring them. In fact, they usually get much worse. If our dentist/patient relationships are based on anything other than telling the truth, they will break down.

The same applies to the problem employee, the poor dental lab technician, and the mediocre dental supply person. We may let them get by with rude, mediocre, or just plain bad service. It is wishful thinking to hope it will go away; it never does.

The problems can be solved by telling the truth in a loving way. Think about when someone spoke the truth in love to you, and it encouraged you to change in a positive way despite that it may have been uncomfortable at that moment. Speaking the truth in love requires us to gently, honestly, and tactfully tell someone the truth, tailoring our words to each individual by keeping in mind their personality and communication style.

When we fail to tell the truth, we have no one to blame but ourselves when our relationship with our patient becomes hostile and filled with rage. This often occurs when patients hear the truth about their situations, frequently from another dentist.

The good news is the truth will set us and our patients free. This happens in spite of possible initial negative responses, which are part of the normal grieving process (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). This is a normal human reaction when we have been advised of a major, negative event. We still need to give all patients the truth even though it may start the grieving process. They must go through this process prior to accepting the treatment they need. We need to be supportive of our patients during this difficult time and not take things personally. Rest assured, it is always best to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

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