



# It's Not 'Just a Cleaning'

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One of the largest obstacles the profession of dentistry faces is public perception. Have you seen the memes floating around out there? You know the ones — they read: “What I do ... What my family thinks I do ... What my friends think I do.” We, as dental providers, know better but somehow, much of our culture has become ingrained with the notions that dentistry and oral health care are “not a big deal.” How many times have you heard, “Just yank ‘em all out and make me a quick denture, Doc”?

Although we do encounter this with restorative topics, there is no larger example of patients minimizing the importance of dentistry than with the recall hygiene appointment. “I’m sorry I can’t make it to my cleaning appointment. But it’s *just* a cleaning, right?” If your front desk staff is regularly hearing this from patients when they call the practice, you may have an excellent opportunity to educate your patient population.

We dental providers need to make a concerted effort to explain to patients not only what procedures we are doing, but why we are doing them. In doing so, we will reverse the sentiment that it’s “just a cleaning” because the patients will truly understand and value the components of the cleaning appointment. Patients with high “dental IQs” value the effort and skill it takes to perform a specific procedure and understand why that procedure is important. Because of this, high “dental IQ” patients are more likely to keep their appointments and more likely to refer friends and family to your office.

How do we create a culture of high “dental IQ” patients within our practices? It often starts with the dental hygienist and effective communication at the hygiene appointment. Undoubtedly, there are many different ways to accomplish these goals, but here are a few of my favorite ideas.

First, tackle that elephant in the room head on and explain exactly what a “cleaning” entails. All these conversations can be as technical (or non-technical) as you desire. I suggest you remember the old adage: “Know your audience.” If the patient in the chair is one who loves science, health or learning in general, then give them the full monty, and don’t hold back the meticulous details!

Perhaps discuss the differences between supragingival and subgingival calculus deposits and the bacterial strains that form them. Or maybe discuss how an ultrasonic scaler or diode laser works in their mouth. I always tell this type of patient that I’m going to “deputize” them into dentistry with a

wealth of knowledge, and they love it! Other patients, however, would prefer not to hear the details and are more comfortable with broader brush strokes — and that's perfectly fine!

These patients respond well to conceptual discussions and often love hearing analogies that compare dentistry to completely unrelated professions. Don't feel that you have to cram your entire dental education into the patient's head in one visit. "Deputizing" them slowly over time is usually much more palatable, and non-dental conversations are just as important to patient rapport and communication. Consider making it a personal goal to work the dental education for a portion or percentage of the appointment, but follow the flow of the conversation and let it go where it takes you. Initially, I would recommend discussing the basics of the dental hygiene appointment. Here are just a few essential topics to consider discussing:

- Periodontal probing
- Oral cancer screening
- Radiological exam
- Fluoride treatment
- Prophylaxis

Once you've covered the essentials of a hygiene appointment, the patient will likely have already gained tremendous insight and information, but don't stop there. Take the discussion outside the hygiene realm and consider educating patients on specific procedures and skills offered by the practice that may benefit their oral condition. Here are just a few examples:

- Invisalign
- Teeth whitening
- Cosmetic bonding
- Nightguards
- Sports mouthguards

Important disclaimer: In order to effectively teach patients about any of these topics, one must have a full understanding yourself. This is no small task considering the speed at which our profession evolves; it will take a significant ongoing commitment. Make a concerted effort to stay current on dental materials, chemistry, products and rationale for use for the countless dental topics that could be discussed. Also, make it a point to walk the dental aisle in your local pharmacy or supermarket at least twice a year to stay familiar with what's being offered to consumers. With a seemingly endless abundance of over-the-counter products, patients always have questions, and having the knowledge to answer them on the spot is beneficial.

We dental providers need to make a concerted effort to explain to patients not only what procedures we are doing but why we are doing them. Through this additional effort, we create patients who understand our methods and reverse the public sentiment that it's "just a cleaning" or "just a filling."

It's a long road to change this perception, but the rewards are plentiful for the patient and provider alike. Let's all start today!

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