

Evaluation of Patient Satisfaction Based on Communication Skills of Dentists in Mumbai City: A Cross-Sectional Questionnaire Based Survey

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Abstract

Background: Soft skills are skills people use to communicate, solve problems, lead and think creatively in contrast to hard skills, which are an object, machines, tools and are technically oriented. They help to organize, plan, and manage health care better. They are one of the key factors in successful dental practice. Soft skills increase confidence, professionalism, coordination, friendliness, and optimism in an individual to greater extent. The present study is designed to assess soft skills of dentists in Navi Mumbai.

Methods: The present study is a cross-sectional questionnaire-based study carried out in the month of July and August 2015 among the patients visiting the private clinic in and around Navi Mumbai. A sample size of the study was 420. Frequency and percentage of responses to each question were reported.

Results: The majority of the respondents (73%) felt that they were explained their treatment satisfactorily. Majority of respondents (94.5%) people felt sufficiently involved in their treatment but, 5.5% patients felt they didn't have a say in the treatment they received.

Conclusion: The present study showed that 73% dentist explained and answered patients' quires beyond the expectation of the patients. 76.1% felt that dentists met their expectations in being supportive and understanding their experience. It is a very necessary to understand the patient psychology and accordingly formulate a treatment that meets their requirements. By making our patients fully informed partners in the care we provide, we ensure that the gesture is returned by being loyal and continuing care with us.

Key words: Dentists, Navi Mumbai, Patient satisfaction, Soft skills

INTRODUCTION

A soft skill is the ability to make use of one's knowledge readily and effectively. One must have the ability to be discerning to be competent in one's skill. Skills can be learned and are essential in the everyday function of organizations. Soft or social skills are those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability

to fit in a particular structure such as a project team or a company. Perrault defined soft skills as personal qualities, attributes or the level of commitment of an individual that sets him apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience.¹ The soft skills are skills people use to communicate, solve problems, lead and think creatively in contrast to hard skills, which are object, machines, tools and are technically oriented. As introduced, there is no definition based on the functionally soft skills. Soft skills are used in personal and professional life. The soft skills help to organize, plan, and manage the changes during the course of growing dental practice. Soft skills increase confidence, professionalism, coordination, friendliness, and optimism in an individual to greater extent. According to the survey of North America, organizational culture and motivational fit are more toward 31% and critical reasoning

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and judgment with interpersonal behavior is 21% and 26%, respectively. Technical skills contribute around 12% and 10% of relevant experience.²

There are various types of soft skills like positive attitude which includes helping hand for personal relationship, positive and good approach for optimistic behavior; self-confidence which is a need to project a sense of calm and inspire confidence in others to build-up positive skill and energy; work ethics which includes highly motivated and dedicated persons to do their best work; teamwork which is a need to take a leadership role and form co-operative group or teams; good communication skills which says they should be good listeners, verbally active to communicate with colleagues, patients, customers and express their needs to the concerned personally; time management skills are essential to use time on job wisely. They should be able to work confidently on different projects and priorities the task accordingly; problem-solving skills teach to take the responsibility and initiative to creatively solve problems; flexibility and adaptability teaches to be strong enough to adapt to new situations and challenges to embrace the change and be open to accept the new ideas.²

Knowing the importance of soft skills in dentistry, which could affect the patient satisfaction, the present study was planned with objective to investigate the effect of soft skills of dentists on patient's perception of quality.

METHODS

The present study is a cross-sectional questionnaire-based study carried out in the month of July and August 2015, among the patients visiting the private clinic in and around Navi Mumbai. The patients were randomly selected. Prior to the start of study, necessary permissions were taken from the Head of Department, Institutional Research Board of YMT Dental College, Kharghar.

A questionnaire consisting of 10 questions was distributed among people who had visited private dental practitioners wherein one or more treatment was rendered by the dentist and not by the associates or consultants. They were met personally and a questionnaire was filled in the same meeting.

Sample Size

Since there was no prevalent data from the literature available, the sample size was determined using single proportion formula; where 50% was taken as the level of communication skill. Thus, the sample size determined was 384 for a population of 10,000-1,000,000 and hence, rounding to 400.

Pilot Study

Content, construct validity of questions was checked in a pilot study done on 25 randomly selected patients who visited the outpatient department at a dental college in Navi Mumbai. These 25 patients were not included in final study. After conducting the pilot study, a thorough discussion with an expert to check the inherent flaws in the designing of questionnaire, and corrections were made accordingly.

Data Collection

Patients above the age of 20 years, who were willing to participate and who gave a verbal and written consent to participate in the study were included in the present study. A participation was voluntary and anonymous. There were no limitations to inclusion of patients based on gender, caste, and religion and socio-economic status.

Instrument to assess soft skill was self-designed pretested questionnaire consisting of 10 questions. All questions were in English however during the time of interview communication was facilitated in local language by the investigators. The questionnaire was restricted to 10 questions to prevent patient fatigue and to get the most genuine response.

Statistical Analysis

The questionnaire forms which were collected back were screened for completeness. Any unfilled or partially filled forms were discarded. All forms which were to be included in the final analysis were numbered serially. All questions and options were coded numerically and data obtained was compiled on MS Office Excel Sheet 2010. Data were analyzed by Statistical Package for Social Sciences V22.0, IBM. Results are presented as frequency and percentage of responses to each question.

RESULTS

In the present study, a total of around 420 questionnaires were distributed and 402 were received back, giving a response rate of the survey was 95.14% (Table 1).

Among the respondent's, 315 (78.4%) responded that they were referred by a friend or relative, whereas only 32 (8%) said that they followed advertisements while selecting their dentists. About 46% patients visited dentists because they experienced pain followed by 19.2% went for routine check-up.

The majority of the respondents (73%) felt that they were explained their treatment satisfactorily, whereas only

Table 1: Responses of patients to various questions

Q. No	Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
1	How did you come to know about your dentist?	Via a friend or relative	315	78.4
		Friend and advertisements and hoardings	1	0.2
		Advertisements and hoardings	32	8
		Referred by another doctor	54	13.4
2	Reason for visiting the dentist	Pain	185	46
		General check up	77	19.2
		Gum problems	53	13.2
		Extraction	34	8.5
		Replacement of missing teeth	33	8.2
		Others	15	3.7
		Pain and check up	1	0.2
		Check up and gum problems	1	0.2
		Check up and extraction	1	0.2
		Check-up and others	1	0.2
		Extraction and replacement	1	0.2
3	Did the dentist explain your treatment answer your questions and listen to your concerns?	Beyond expectation	97	24.1
		Met expectation	293	72.9
		Below expectation	12	3
4	Did you feel your dentist was supportive and understood what you were trying to feel and experience?	Beyond expectation	87	21.6
		Met expectation	306	76.1
		Below expectation	9	2.2
5	Did you feel involved in your treatment?	Beyond expectation	88	21.9
		Met expectation	292	72.6
		Below expectation	22	5.5
6	Discomforts (if any) were they attended positively?	Beyond expectation	90	22.4
		Met expectation	271	67.4
		Below expectation	32	8.0
		None	9	2.2
7	On follow-up visits (if needed) how was care provided?	Beyond expectation	93	23.1
		Met expectation	276	68.7
		Below expectation	19	4.7
		None	14	3.5
8	Were you happy with how the staff/associates treated you?	Beyond expectation	87	21.6
		Met expectation	297	73.9
		Below expectation	18	4.5
9	Rate your experience	Excellent	67	16.7
		Very good	177	44.0
		Good	134	33.3
		Average	24	6.0
		Poor	0	0.0
10	Reason for dissatisfaction	Appointment time slots	40	10
		Multiple visits	84	20.9
		Longer waiting duration	80	19.9
		Overpriced treatments	61	15.2
		Appointment time slots and multiple visits	5	1.2
		Appointment time slots, multiple visits and longer waiting duration	1	0.2
		Multiple visit and longer duration	3	0.7
		Multiple visit, longer duration, and overpriced	1	0.2
		Multiple visit and overpriced treatments	5	1.2
		Longer waiting and overpriced	3	0.7
		Others	48	11.9
		Multiple visit and others	1	0.2
		None	70	17.4

minimum of 3% was not satisfied and 24% got more than what they expected.

A total of 306 patients (76%) felt that the dentist was supportive enough and understood them; however, the percent of people who were satisfied beyond expectation dropped to 21% (Q. No. 4).

The majority of respondents (94.5%) people felt sufficiently involved in their treatment but, 5.5% patients felt they did not have a say in the treatment they received. (Q. No. 5). Close to 89.8% patients felt their discomforts were taken care of during the treatment. The number of dissatisfied patients rises to 8% here and only 2% patients out of 402 experienced no discomforts (Q. No. 6).

On follow-up visits, 68.7% patients were provided care that met their expectations and 23.1% experienced care that was beyond their expectation but 5% were still not happy (Q. No. 7) Around 74% patients were happy by the way; they were greeted and treated by the staff and associates and 4.5% were unhappy (Q. No. 8).

About 44% (171/402) rated their experience as very good, followed by 33.3% (134/402) who said it was good, close to 17% said it was excellent and only minimum of 6% said it was average. None of the patients said it was poor (Q. No. 9).

Main reason for dissatisfaction noted were multiple visits at 20.9%, longer waiting durations at 20%, overpriced treatments at 15%, and appointment time slots of the dentist at 10%. However, 17% patients said there was no reason for dissatisfaction (Q. No. 10).

DISCUSSION

Health care today is becoming more patient centered and as a result patient's experience of care and assessment of satisfaction level have to be taken more seriously as it influences the treatment cooperation and leads to overall better prognosis and healthier relations on the long term.³ According to Holt and McHugh study, the main reason for changing dentist among many patients in their survey was dentist's interpersonal attributes⁴ and yet sufficient literature has not been recorded in this field and hence we decided to carry out a study highlighting the importance of soft skills of a dentist for having happy and satisfied patients.

Satisfaction is a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a products perceived performance or outcome in relation to his or her expectation.⁵

Soft skills, a cluster of personality traits, as mentioned before are also a measure of one's emotional intelligence quotient and plays a vital role in contributing to the success of a practice.

The six basic expectations of a patient from their dentist are: Friendliness, empathy, efficiency and punctuality, control, options and alternatives and information.⁶

In our survey, we identified that a majority of patients go to a dentist only when recommendation comes by relative or a friend which is an indication of a past good experience with the dentist. A friendly and approachable dentist is always preferred over a rude or insensitive one.

Communication skills of a dentist in terms of explaining the treatment, answering questions and listening properly

to the patients concerns without interrupting them is also important. Barnes found the dentist's willingness to talk to patients and sensitivity expressed toward children to be important criteria in assessment.⁷

Since about 70% patients said that their needs meet expectations, it suggests that a considerable number of dentists did communicate well, however, there is still room for improvement, and we recommend spending more time with patients at their initial visit.

Empathizing with the patient and listening to them attentively will very often tell you what the patient needs. This was also demonstrated in survey by Rezi which stated that the likelihood of overall satisfaction was found to be significantly and independently increased by the physician's ability to give explanations and to show empathy for the patient's conditions⁸ It is also very important to communicate it back to the patient that the problem has been understood and using his critical thinking skills find a solution that meets his patient's needs.

Treating a patient as a whole and not merely the disease, giving them options and alternatives and making them a part of their treatment planning, makes them feel they have control over the situation and are not merely guinea pigs in our hands goes a long way in enhancing their experience regarding dental visits. According to Harris Interactive health-care poll, 85% of those polled said treating a patient with dignity and respect is an extremely important quality in a doctor, and 85% cited listening carefully and being easy to talk to as important qualities.⁹

There was a marked increase in the level of dissatisfaction of patients when it came to managing discomforts during treatments and while following up with patients especially in the event of complications, dentists need to be humane and compassionate, positively reassuring the patient, being calm while working and providing symptomatic care whenever in necessary. A sincere apology in an event of an error would go a long way in strengthening relations, reinforcing displaced trust and avoiding medico-legal complications.

A pleasant dental experience is a team approach. Training the receptionist to greet the patients, asking him, how was his appointment while concluding his visit, making follow-up calls if discomfort is anticipated, properly conversing over the telephone and avoiding any miscommunications, help build relations with the whole team and make them feel more comfortable.

An average of 20% patients has marked the option of beyond expectation in questions related to soft skills of a

dentist and the same is reflected on the number of patients marking excellent. This clearly reflects that better the soft skills, happier the patients. Holt and McHugh found the most important factor influencing dentist/practice loyalty to be “care and attention” rated as very important by 90% of respondents.⁴ Corah *et al.*, pointed out those evaluations of technical competence (measured by asking patients to respond to statements such as: “The dentist was thorough in doing the procedure” and “I was satisfied with what the dentist did”) are most likely based on interpersonal factors such as “communication” and “caring” and “information-giving.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Within the limitations of the present study, we conclude that soft skills form an integral part of a dentist’s personality and needs to be mastered not only as a person but as a team (i.e., with associates and staff) for a successful practice with happy patients.

Patients perceive service quality by comparing their expectations to actual experience. It is very necessary to understand the patient psychology and accordingly formulate a treatment that meets their requirements. Putting it simply if the patient perceives care at a certain level but expected something more different, and then they will be dissatisfied. Both perception and expectation are states of mind and we as dentists need to understand this interrelation to keep our patients happy.

By making our patients fully informed partners in the care we provide, we ensure that the gesture is returned by being loyal and continuing care with us. Work satisfaction, renewed motivation and increased productivity can be achieved by using effective communication skills. While doing so also make sure you as a professional convey to

the patient what you feel is the best plan for them and also any compromises if expected.

We recommend monitoring social media as negative feedback is more frequently and freely written publicly in these websites than is communicated to the dentist in person.

We recommend that a workshop on developing soft skills and communication skills should be a part of the undergraduate curriculum and also promote the same as continuing dental education/continuing medical education events.

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