



Communication Skills.

The two mechanics

I had a problem with my car last week, there was a rattle in one of the wheels, so I decided to take it to a mechanic. To be honest I don't know a lot about cars. With my automobile-uneducated viewpoint I always feel ill equipped to participate in conversations about cars with mechanics. I feel at the mercy of a mechanic's potentially criminal over treatment planning. I tend to try and look pensive and knowledgeable, nodding in a sagely manner to counter the potential for expensive garage bills.

I used to have a lovely, friendly independent mechanic for many years who used to often suggest cheaper patch up jobs to 'get by' for a while. Now I tend to steer clear of independent mechanics, opting instead for an "approved" dealership typically where I bought the car from. As the logo of the car manufacturer is emblazoned on the outside of the building just the same as on my car bonnet, it seems appropriate. Rightly or wrongly my assumption is that their treatment of my car will somehow be better than an independent garage.

How do you choose your mechanic?

Mechanic number 1

As I entered the garage, it was a little bit haphazard, the door hinge squeaked and there were some oil-stained rags in a pile in the corner that looked as if they had been there for quite some time. He said the rattle in the wheel was fixed by giving it a bit of a bang with a hammer and it should be fine now. The communication was basic, brief and to the point. The premises were a bit shabby but functional.

Mechanic number 2

As I entered the garage, I noticed everything was clean and shiny, there were numerous electronic machines with blinking lights. I felt like I could have eaten my lunch from the floor. He said that one of the wheel nuts had been tightened with too much torque. This was shown by one of the diagnostic machines. In the trade magazine last month there was an article that said what could sometimes happen is contralateral loosening on the opposite wheel. If this happened again, he told me to come in for a quick visit to sort it out.

The question from me to you is, which is the better mechanic?

Most of you, my esteemed readers will probably feel that mechanic number two is somehow better. Some of you might prefer mechanic number one. I'm not sure which is better. Both seemed to have solved the problem but communicated in very different ways. They also had different styles of physical presentation and premises. Undeniably, the quality of



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communication with mechanic number two far surpassed the quality of communication with mechanic number one.

This can be how our patients judge how good a dentist we are. They can't look at how acute the Cavo surface angle is. They can't judge the shape of the fillers in our composites (are they spherical, irregular, or mixed). So they tend to choose a dentist based on the factors they can easily assess. How are the premises presented and what is the quality of the communication they experience?

Let's make sure that our communication is the best quality that we can deliver. There was a study in 2002 by Langowitz. It mentions that we have a tendency to interrupt our patients very early after they start to talk with us. Typically, within about ten seconds of them starting their story. We will probably be doing this with nothing but good intentions in order to home in on a diagnosis and start to provide treatment in a timely manner.

This interruption/ interrogation style of questioning unfortunately only has the effect of lengthening the patients' stories from about two and a half minutes to four minutes. It also has the effect of throwing the patient off their task of story completion. They tend to consider this task as extremely important and if not completed, can leave them dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction can cause a ramekin of ramifications for the dentist and their teams.

If you would like to consider good time management, not interrupting the story is probably a very good idea. Our job as health care professionals is simply to enable informed choice. How do we do this?

We like to give our patients the right information at the right time in the right style so they can fully understand their options in order to facilitate their decision-making process. This is not only how we defend ourselves, medicolegally, but also ensures that our patients get exactly what they want within the range of treatments that we offer.

Let's consider from a patient's point of view how it is to be walking into our clinic. Does the door hinge creak? Is there a brown water stain on a ceiling tile in the corner of the waiting room from the burst pipe a couple of years ago? Are those three dead flies still in the light fitting above your dental chair that your patient inevitably fixates upon every time the chair is laid back?

These showcase poor maintenance of the facilities to the patient. We don't need to showcase our services in a smoked glass and architectural aluminium atria. Most of us will preside over pretty standard high street premises that might have seen better days.

When the front door hinge creaks thirsty for oil, I guarantee that the patient will remember it from their appointment last year. They will sit in the waiting room and notice once again the brown water stain on the ceiling tile that should have been replaced. When the chair lays back in the surgery, the friendly familiarity of the three dead flies in the overhead light fitting will not imbue a warm fuzzy feeling but will showcase a lack of maintenance that has



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occurred over the past year. The unspoken question could be: If this dentist is unable to carry out basic routine maintenance to the premises then how would they be trusted or equipped to maintain my oral health?

It is quite easy to instruct your nurse to climb a step ladder at her next lunch break to clean the light fittings. If you are a true leader by example, consider doing it yourself. Showcasing good behaviour is a sure fire way to encourage your team to actively take pride in their working environment themselves.

Next time you take your car to a mechanic, stop, and think! How is it that you assess how good he or she is? Is it the quality of communication that keeps you going back time after time? If the communication quality is not quite good enough, will you just silently trickle away to a different mechanic down the road?

What would you do if you were a patient at your own practice?