



Chapter 1: Professionalism: The cornerstone

When it comes to effectively and efficiently managing a dental practice – or any such client-centered business for that matter – professionalism is an essential element to success. Indeed, it’s the absolute foundation and cornerstone, without which, achieving excellence is beyond reach. Like many professions, there’s a hustle about dentistry derived from always having to be on your toes to the physical push of moving from patient to patient.

Face it, dentistry is a key part of health care and arguably is among the most client-centered professions on the planet. After all, we eat to live and, not to put too fine a point on it, our teeth – and their ability to chew – are the key interface to this thrice-daily activity.

For me, when people enjoy good dental health, they are well down the road to overall health. They don’t suffer pain when they eat and can enjoy their food. They can think; interact with others; learn; smile. They can enjoy life.

Therefore, your dental practice professionalism must be firmly people-focussed. And when I say that I include patients – current and prospective – and staff.

Professionalism is far more than just competence, responsibility, or being polite. Also enmeshed in its framework is integrity, fairness, communication, service orientation, and mutual respect. It is also determined in case law that “Dentists are distinguished not only by their cognitive and clinical skills, but

also by their commitment to professionalism in their interactions with others. Care and effort must be taken to demonstrate respect and consideration in professional interactions.”¹

Put it all together and for me, it comes down to trust – between patient and practitioner/staff.

Merriam-Webster defines professionalism this way: “the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person.” That’s a fine general definition, but the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario (RCDSO) drills deeper.

On its website, the RCDSO describes it, in part, this way:

Trust is the foundation of a successful patient-dentist relationship. A patient's level of confidence in the practitioner determines whether he or she will regularly seek dental care. Furthermore, a patient who believes a dentist is honest is more likely to accept the dentist’s treatment recommendation than one who is concerned the treatment plan may be financially motivated. Similarly, studies indicate that patients are more inclined to discuss personal health information with dentists who are well-groomed, speak with a professional tone of voice and appear confident.

In addition, if the Discipline Committee of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons “after a hearing finds that a member of the College is guilty of infamous, disgraceful or improper conduct in a professional respect, it may” impose certain penalties on that member.²

And remember that word hustle I mentioned earlier? It also applies to what I like to call a professional’s constant search for improvement by keeping up with what’s going on in your field, so you deliver the best outcomes to your patients.

This may be the understatement of the century, but running a dental practice is not easy. Today it is not surprising to find dental offices at every corner, so the competition for new patients is great. You need to market yourself and your oral health care practice effectively – promoting its unique qualities through advertising and patient interactions – to attract and retain a high volume of patients. Things like improving office culture, ranging from décor to friendly staff, flexible financial options, and staff training, from receptionist on up, are key elements.

A crucial component is ensuring your scheduling system software is current and goes beyond just allowing you to book appointments. I’ll have more to say about this later, but a good office software must again be patient-friendly – decreasing their stress and contributing to the great service they expect – and be easy to master by your staff.

¹ 2018 CanLII 82190 (ON HPARB)

² Mady and Discipline Committee of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons (1974), 5 O.R. (2d) 414.

And since your client's first point of contact is likely a receptionist or another member of the front office team, that's the place to start when looking at practice culture. Each staffer who greets or works with patients, in person or over the phone, must exhibit the kind friendly professionalism and communication skills that will leave a lasting positive impression on patients.

For the practice team, professionalism should apply to appearance, demeanor, reliability, competence, poise, and politeness. That applies to everything from patient interaction to phone protocol to written correspondence.

Let's look at some of these in a bit more depth.

Phone Etiquette

There's an adage that applies here: you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

Often, the first impression a patient gets of your office is from a phone call. Though calls are mostly answered by front office staff, it's important that the entire practice be aware of phone etiquette techniques or scripts if called to help at the front desk.

I remember a dental lecturer many years ago suggesting that front desk staff should be looking into a mirror when answering the phone so they can see their facial expression when speaking with clients. The point she made is this: one should smile when communicating over the phone because a smile delivers warmth to the person and can be felt at the other end of the line.

Of course, the words "please" and "thank you" should be liberally sprinkled throughout phone calls.

Appearance

Now this relates to both the office itself and staff. And since there's no second chance to create that critical first impression, your office must be patient-friendly, clean, and orderly – and in a building whose lobby signals the professionalism you offer. Staff appearance is key as well; as a professional, brush and floss teeth regularly and be well groomed.

Looking professional is critical. Over my years in dental offices, many dentists provided uniforms, but enabled each team member to choose the style they preferred. The uniforms were all the same color – solidifying that unifying sense of team that is so important, while still enabling staff to express their individualism.

Demeanor

This is all about conduct towards others. We've all had those bad days. But taking out your troubles on patients or co-workers is not only unprofessional, it sows disunity. Smile and demonstrate mutual

respect with people you interact with. Keep your cell phone on vibrate mode and make personal calls outside the office or, if necessary, in a room away from patients.

Reliability and Responsibility

People – co-workers, employers, and patients – appreciate trustworthiness and performance consistency. Be on time, stay on schedule as much as possible, and let the front office know when that schedule is challenged.

On the responsibility side, it means being available, especially for patients who have an emergency. But just on a day-to-day basis, when you make a mistake – we’re all human, after all – admit it and adjust your actions accordingly. More litigation is brought about when providers fail to communicate the truth to patients.

Competence

Simply put, competence is the ability to do something successfully or efficiently. In a dental practice, that means having the proper qualifications to do the job – then combining that with experience to continually maintain and improve skills. Lifelong learning is critically important in dentistry as the profession continues to evolve.

Even after 30-plus years in dentistry, I still try to take more continuing education courses than the minimum required to maintain my license. Essentially, attaining competency is not a destination, but rather a continuous journey.

I once worked for a dental specialist whose patients were, of course, mostly referrals by colleagues in other practices who trusted his professionalism. And he worked hard to attain that trust; even when having lunch, I noticed he was always reading something to improve his skills. For him, keeping up in his field was something he was personally responsible for; he also knew that value would increase the comfort level of referring dentists.

Clearly, patients would report back to the referring dentist about their experience, so our competence was key in keeping those referral channels open. There were times when practices would call us in appreciation of how well we had treated one of their patients.

One habit our specialist practiced was to call each patient the evening after their surgery to ensure they were coping well and to answer any concerns they might have. Patients thought that was not just professional, but caring, and often talked about it. I’m guessing not many dentists or dental surgeons make this part of their practice.

Beyond knowing your job, competency in a dental practice also means interacting well with patients. Showing cultural respect, empathy, and sympathy will make patients feel comfortable and deliver them the kind of visit they'll remember positively – and pass on to their friends.

Politeness and Poise

Being polite signals respect and consideration for other people and it's critical for the entire team in any dental practice.

I recall one patient who was obviously having a bad day; he let me know his displeasure and wondered out loud if this was my first day. I told him I had many years experience though it was my first day at that particular practice. He slowly calmed down and as I worked, we talked and found we shared some common experiences and views. My point: staying calm and trying to get to the bottom of his bad mood helped me connect with this patient, who left much happier than when he arrived.

Several years ago, my dentist took the whole staff to a learning session in Las Vegas. The team attended a lecture and learned skills together so we could practice it together back in Canada. I still use those skills, one of the most important of which was what the lecturer called “the courtesy system” – the use of please and thank you at a minimum. Indeed, our patients often commented on how staff were so openly polite to them and to each other.

For example, when the dentist asked for an instrument, please was the first word and thank you was the response. The result? Patients felt they were being served well by professionals who respected them and each other.

Here's part of that “System of Courtesy.”

1. Speak very politely, using a person's name and don't forget please and thank you.
2. When you talk about a person who is not present, speak as if they are there listening to your conversation.
3. If you have a problem with someone, talk about the problem only with them and in private.
4. Apologize and make restitution if someone is upset by your actions.
5. Greet everyone by name and make eye contact if possible.
6. Blame a system not a person.
7. Tell the truth.
8. Use positive conversation.³

³ Paddi Lund, *Building the Happiness-Centered Business*, 2nd Ed. (Bulimba, Australia: Solutions Press, 1997).

This type of professionalism spilled over into our personal lives as well. For instance, many of my patients were also clients from my business; they were attracted to the practice because I was proud of – and bragged about – the quality of service my dentist delivered. Even my shoemaker became a patient and before long, my dentist was treating his whole family and many of his friends. After a while, most of my clients came from my business circle, which made it easy to build a base clientele who were loyal and kept their appointments. There were times I had a few cancellations but when they happened, I knew who I could call personally, and they would come at short notice.

But at work, it made for a happiness-centered practice for staff and patients. And in order for this to happen, it had to come from the top – the dentist.

Professionalism encompasses everything we do – even written correspondence. The forms we fill out every day, including chart notes, are legal documents, so pay attention to grammar and spelling.

Again, professionalism is not a destination, it's a constant journey. I know from personal experience we all fall short on occasion. So admit it and jump back in the game. In the dental world, we must never lose our dedication to professionalism, or we risk losing the profession itself.