



## How to Empower Your Patients

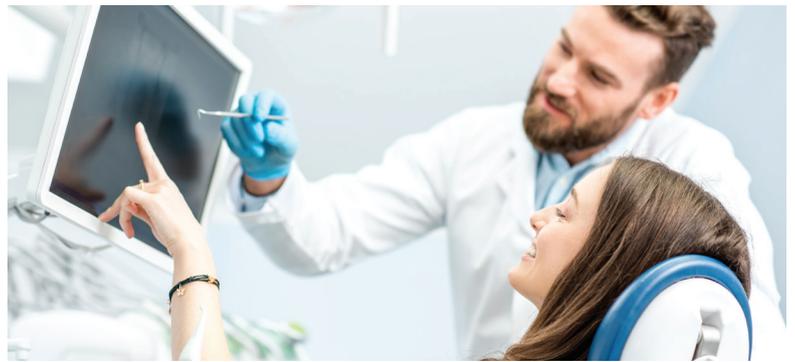
By Eric S. Studley, DDS, and Ivy D. Peltz, DDS, MEd, PhD, MAGD

**B**ased on the principle of autonomy, patients must be involved in decisions about their treatment. Evidence-based practice incorporates the needs and desires of patients into appropriate clinical decisions. Patient compliance is an important determining factor in whether or not dental treatment will succeed. Nonetheless, many patients do not instinctively present with the interest or desire to take part in their own treatment decisions and subsequent care. How do we empower patients who are not otherwise interested in being involved in their own outcomes?

**Automate.** Patients sometimes procrastinate. When they decide to make an appointment, they need to be able to find you and schedule a visit quickly and easily. In order to help, you need a visible internet presence. Make sure your website informs patients about your practice and makes explicit the elements of care that distinguish your practice from others. Incorporate elements into the website that will give control to prospective and current patients. Allow patients to schedule their own appointments with an e-service that manages your online calendar. Enable patients to complete paperwork on a secure server in advance of their appointments. Create a frequently asked questions section so patients can begin to manage their expectations and apprehension before their visit.

**Elevate and Communicate.** Many patients don't believe that they have any alternatives when it comes to their health care. They expect an authoritarian approach where the doctor informs them of a diagnosis and a course of treatment, and their job is to comply. In reality, there are three separate sources of knowledge that should influence how you and your patient develop a treatment plan: the best available evidence, the abilities and resources of the practitioner and the needs and desires of the patient.

Rather than assigning equal weight to each of the three sources when making an evidence-based



decision, you can empower your patients by giving more weight to their needs and desires. Consequently, it is your job to find out what those needs and desires are. Consider this situation: The best available evidence concludes that a missing tooth should be replaced with an implant. The doctor is skilled in implant placement and has the most advanced armamentaria, but the patient has no desire to replace the tooth and cannot be convinced. What factor will ultimately influence treatment?

**Listen.** Start by acknowledging the important role your patients play in their own care, and practice active listening to learn how you can best help.

**Individualize.** Once you understand your patients' needs and desires, identify the best course of treatment. Inform your patient that they are receiving individualized care. The days of automatic six-month recare appointments are over; you should perform a risk analysis to determine appropriate treatment and schedules for recare. Patients are not always aware that dentistry is not one-size-fits-all and that their care caters to their specific needs, desires and mouths.

**Educate.** After you have identified the best courses of treatment for your patients, you will need to educate them. You should ensure your patient has a solid understanding of the implications of all treatment options. Patients may have questions and should be given some time to digest complicated situations before they make any decisions. During the decision-making process, you should make yourself accessible to answer questions either by email or phone. If your patients contact you, be sure to reply in a timely fashion.

**Delegate and Habituate.** Patients do not always realize that the success of their treatment is largely within their own control. You should effectively communicate that dental treatment is a partnership involving the acceptance of responsibility and commitment to care from both dentists and patients. If patients seem non-compliant, analyze their current behavior to determine if you should suggest any modifications to their treatment plan. Maybe your patients aren't wearing their glasses while performing their oral home care and can't see if their teeth are clean. Maybe creating a recare appointment before patients leave your office after treatment will keep them on a schedule. Work with your patients to analyze how they can regulate their behaviors to improve their home care management and their follow-up treatment.

By empowering your patients to participate in their own treatment, you are increasing the likelihood that they will perceive the value of your care, and you are solidifying the doctor-patient relationship. Empowering your patients empowers you. ♦

---

Eric S. Studley, DDS, and Ivy D. Peltz, DDS, MEd, PhD, MAGD, are general practice directors and clinical associate professors at New York University College of Dentistry. They are also cofounders of Doccupa-tions, an algorithmic dental job-matching website. To comment on this article, email [impact@agd.org](mailto:impact@agd.org).

Published with permission of the Academy of General Dentistry.  
© Copyright 2020 by the Academy of General Dentistry.  
All rights reserved. For printed and electronic reprints of this article for distribution, please contact [jkaleta@mossbergco.com](mailto:jkaleta@mossbergco.com).