

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PATIENTS ABOUT TEETH WHITENING AND OTHER COSMETIC DENTAL TREATMENT OPTIONS

Discussing teeth whitening or any other cosmetic treatment options with patients is often difficult for many dentists and team members. There are numerous reasons why some dentists and team may be cautious or reserved about promoting or discussing esthetic and elective smile improvement services.

Some are too busy and don't allow enough time to have a proper discussion if the patient is interested and they don't allocate such time for their team members. Others may be concerned that placing too much emphasis on cosmetic procedures like teeth whitening could contribute to a culture that prioritizes appearance over oral health. They might want to ensure that patients understand the importance of maintaining good oral hygiene and focus on health-related dental issues. There are dentists and/or hygienists who believe that if a patient's oral health is generally good, there is no pressing need for teeth whitening and may hesitate to suggest it. In addition, many are worried that they will upset or offend the patient.

In light of all these challenges, how do you elegantly and professionally bring up the idea of teeth whitening and/or other cosmetic dentistry options? Discussing esthetic elective services requires effective communication that is standardized across all patients and incorporated into the patient's overall exam, and reported as any other condition.

When I first decided to find a way to bring up cosmetic dentistry with our patients, we hit a number of

these challenges. We had lack of consistency between team members and everyone on my team stated that they were uncomfortable bringing up this topic to patients. As we stumbled through, trying one consultant's advice then another, and read some articles of how others do it, none of the methods seemed to sit well with me or my team.

So I decided to go back to the basics, the way I always look at systems, and bringing change into my practice and my life, and the fundamentals that I always follow in order to define a solid system. So here is my step-by-step process of not only developing a system that works, but also how to implement it easily into your practice. This system works for any changes you want to implement, and later in this article, I will show you how you can apply it to cosmetic dental services that you would like to offer.

KNOW YOUR WHY

Knowing, and communicating, why you want to do something or change something is key to anything new you want to succeed in. If you are clear on your why, and inspire those around you to want to work with you towards achieving what it is you want, it develops your culture and what you stand for. Simply telling people to do something doesn't get it done, especially when they don't feel they have enough time or don't know how to do it. And doing it to make more money is not enough of a reason; money, after all, is a result rather than a goal on its own. Finding the deep, inspiring reason requires



DR. AGATHA BIS
DDS PRACTICES IN OAKVILLE,
ONTARIO, CANADA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Bis received her Doctor of Dental Surgery degree from University of Western Ontario in 1996, and her Bachelor of Science from University of Toronto in 1992. With years of clinical experience and thousands of hours in post-graduate training, her unique focus and expertise in treating Temporomandibular Joint Disorder and comprehensive restorative dentistry, along with the use of digital technology, has led to developing exceptional systems to diagnosis and treatment planning, helping chronic pain patients treat their unresolved jaw pain, migraines and headaches.

BETTER COMMUNICATION: BREAKING IT DOWN

answering the big question: how do people transform as a result of what it is you want to do? This is, in a nutshell, a list of ways that your patients would benefit from what you are offering, and how their lives would be transformed for the better.

KNOW YOUR WHAT

Knowing your what means understanding the difference of ideal or healthy vs undesirable or diseased. For a smile to appear beautiful, there are certain elements that are common like straight, aligned teeth, clean white teeth, symmetry, healthy looking teeth and gums, and other aspects of what goes into smile design. For a smile to look undesirable, there are also a number of common aspects that we are all aware of, like misaligned or crowded teeth, discoloration, visible stain or tartar, unhealthy looking gums, chipped, broken, decayed, or missing teeth, and visible restorations. Once you can list the elements of what is healthy and beautiful, and then list the elements of what isn't healthy and is typically undesirable, then you have the beginning of a template or a checklist.

KNOW YOUR HOW

Knowing how to bring this into daily practice depends on a number of factors. My key ingredients to how to implement any system are the following:

- ✓ Make it easy
- ✓ Make it routine
- ✓ Make it part of something you already do

KNOW YOUR WHEN

Anytime something new is introduced in a dental office, there are going to be some people that naturally perform better and have an

easy time doing it, and then there are others who struggle and find ways to avoid doing it. They may blame it on lack of time, or lack of training, or simply lack of consequences. Knowing when to teach or train, when to react, and when to actually do the thing you want to do is where leadership comes in. Problem in most dental offices is that the dentist/owner gives their people too many choices. When team members are not provided with specific steps and templates on what to do or how to do it, they end up doing things in various ways, often based on what they learned at their previous office.

Results come from knowing what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and who to do it with. Creating a system that tells your people when to do something, in what sequence, and makes it impossible to do it any other way takes decision-making or discretion out of the equation. This creates simplicity, accountability, increases communication, and reduces stress for you and your team.

KNOW YOUR WHO

Who is the patient or the person that you want to implement this change with? Knowing your who means defining the specific patient this would apply to. When it comes to teeth whitening, for example, maybe it would not be such a good idea to start with 6 year old children, or people who have dentures. That may seem obvious but you'd be surprised how many times mistakes like this can happen when you haven't been clear as to who the target person needs to be. Defining who the target patient is means listing and/or outlining the specific characteristics so that when you look at your schedule, everyone knows who the new system applies to. For cosmetic and/or elective dental procedures, it would typically be someone over 18 years of age,

not dependent on another adult for decision-making, and has some or all of their teeth. Once you are sitting down to do this, it becomes easy and obvious to accomplish this.

SO HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO TEETH WHITENING, FOR EXAMPLE?

By now, I hope you are getting a taste of it. It's pretty simple. Add a template to your clinical notes for a continuing-care appointment for anyone who is over 18 years old and has some or all of their own teeth. After screening for oral cancer, periodontal disease, and any other conditions you normally look for in a re-care exam, add this template to your notes and have your hygienists complete this before any scaling takes place. We call it the Smile Health Screening.



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SDI (North America) Inc.
1279 Hamilton Parkway
Itasca, IL 60143

Toll Free 1 800 228 5166
Fax: 630-361-9222
usa.canada@sdi.com.au
www.sdi.com.au

BETTER COMMUNICATION: BREAKING IT DOWN



SMILE HEALTH SCREENING:

A Smile Health Screening is made up of two categories:

1. Elements of a Beautiful Smile
2. Elements of Disease

The combination of beauty and disease defines not only a smile but how a person appears to others.

ELEMENTS OF A BEAUTIFUL SMILE:

- Straight and aligned teeth
- White teeth
- Proportional teeth
- Symmetry
- Healthy gums
- Lack of gaps and spaces
- Proper lip support
- Natural-looking dental work
- Lack of chipped or fractured teeth
- Lack of visible decay

ELEMENTS OF DISEASE:

- Rotations, crowding:
- Discoloration (fluorosis, tetracycline staining, root exposure, endodontically treated teeth that have been unrestored):
- Visible stain and/or tartar:
- Unhealthy gums:
- Gum recession:
- Abfractions:
- Chipped teeth:
- Tooth wear:
- Missing teeth:
- Leaking, broken, or anesthetic dental restorations:
- Visible decay:

Once the template is filled out, and patient ready for the doctor to come in and do an exam, the dental hygienist can simply present the findings of the screening. This takes away the “awkwardness” of talking about cosmetic procedures or options to improve the patient’s smile since the hygienist is simply reporting the findings rather than recommending any solutions. When the doctor is finished with the exam, they can choose to discuss these findings with the patient and ask the patient if they would like to learn more about treatment options. And don’t forget, you can skip any of the above to customize and cater to how you want your practice to run. This system gives you a way to introduce, bring up, and discuss options without offending, upsetting, or making it awkward for your patients or your team.

FUNDAMENTALS OF A SYSTEM:

- ✓ Why you need it
 - ✓ What is healthy and unhealthy
 - ✓ How to implement it into daily practice
 - ✓ When to do it and when not to do it
 - ✓ Who to do it with
- Creates accountability, support, and consistency

TAKE-HOME WHITENING OPTIONS



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