

Trust in a Dental Office

Robert P. McBride, D.D.S., M.A.G.D.

New patients entering a dental office come from a variety of sources, such as personal referrals, dental advertising, the patients' proximity to the dental office or the dentist being on a list of the patient's insurance company providers. Dentists tend to prefer a personal referral, which is usually a friend or family member of the new patient who has offered positive feedback about the dentist and his staff. This helps the dentist in many ways, the most important being the implicit trust based upon the trust that exists between the patient and the referring party.

Other new patients enter a dental practice because they are new to the area, or their former dentist has retired. In this case, the patient may have loved their dentist and received regular care over the years. However, many times when they come to my practice, I see substandard repairs and active gum disease. It is to a far lesser degree that I see new patients who have been taught great home care and have repairs that are of excellent quality. The point is that in both cases, the patient thought highly of their previous dentist, representing a high degree of trust. The fact is that patients most often cannot discern the quality of their dental repairs, and paradoxically, gum disease is rarely painful. This makes it difficult for a patient to find a dentist that they can both trust as well as receive excellent care.

Dentistry is considered to be a helping profession. In any helping relationship, trust needs to be at its core. For over three decades, I have spent time with new patients on their initial appointment to get to know them, as well as having them get to know me, my team and the practice philosophy. It's a "mutual interview." An important aspect of this initial time is the establishment of trust through an authentic discussion that brings out the patients desires, attitude regarding oral health, and any fears or apprehensions that may be roadblocks in their attaining optimum oral health. I believe that this is an essential factor in a true helping relationship. Aspects of this are related in articles on our website in the New Patient Information Center, such as "The Dentist Interview," "Trust," and "Our First Appointment." (<http://www.rpmdentistry.com/new-patient-info-center>).

At an increasing rate, I am noticing that more and more incoming new patients are expressing a distrust of dentistry in general. I hear things like:

"I only saw the dentist for a short time."

"It felt that s/he was trying to sell me something."

"Each time I come in, they find something new to do, and I do everything they tell me between appointments."

"I didn't get an explanation of what s/he was going to do and why."

These are comments that I rarely heard from people in the past. Obviously, that all-too-important element of trust had not been achieved. I have discovered that most dental problems

occur because of what patients *have not* been taught. I see new patients of all ages who have never been properly coached as to how to clean their mouth. They've been given demonstrations with the use of plastic teeth models and a mirror, with the dentist or hygienist brushing and flossing their teeth for them, but never coaching them through the process of doing it themselves. Oral health is something that cannot be dispensed like a filling or cleaning. It is the result of two caring individuals, the dentist and patient, going through an educational process to assess the patient's oral health and develop a proper preventive and treatment plan that will address that persons' unique needs. This requires time, patience, mutual trust and commitment. With these factors in place, all efforts between dentist and patient become far more effective in achieving the goal of optimal oral health. These are the main factors in the development of the Dental Wellness Center's mission of **educating** its patients.

Trust development takes time. That is a big part of what we offer at the Dental Wellness Center - time taken within a process that allows our new patients to learn about the status of their teeth, gum health, general health in relation to oral health, teeth-to-TMJ functional relationship, status of past dentistry and options for any needed future treatment in a safe and caring environment. The process results in an empowered patient; one who truly understands the current status of their oral health, along with preventive and treatment options so that they can make choices for a preferred dental future. Through having created this type of environment, mutual trust is gained, overcoming one of the main roadblocks that stands in the way of achieving enduring oral health.