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Excellent care doesn't happen by the numbers; it takes relationships developed from effective communication between patients and doctors and their teams. When clinicians take the time, early on (like on "Hello"), to be present, ask a few questions, and do some serious listening, magic can happen. The magic comes from a dialogue, a conversation. There's an opportunity for a human connection. And it's amazing what can happen when we see patients in the context of family. When we're authentically interested the care becomes a collaborative effort; levels of trust, shared vision, and even fun are within grasp. The best possible results happen when patients are simply comfortable enough to ask questions and be their own best health advocate. And there are questions patients are more likely to ask when they reach a certain comfort zone. Here are a few queries (with explanations) that can help make a major difference.

Q: The doctor asks, "Is it okay with you if I see you in the context of family while providing care?"

A: After some 30 years of practicing dentistry, I've never heard a more effective question. I always smile and explain my mostly Sicilian heritage and the dire ramifications of any perceived lack of respect, attention, or effort within my famiglia. I always ask permission to offer the same recommendations I'd make to my mom or dad or sister or brother. And I remind patients we're not kidding around about the sign out front that says "...Making Dentistry Fun." Humor is powerful medicine. "Family" is about care...as in "I care."

Q: The doctor asks, "May I have your permission to share everything I see?"

A: I've never heard a "No." This is the patient saying "Yes" to an education and a true comprehensive exam. You might be surprised to learn over 80% of dental patients don't remember ever having had an oral cancer exam. A "Yes" means an opportunity for patients to hear EVERYTHING. There's way too strong an oral health-general health connection to be less than complete. In the U.S., one person an hour dies of oral cancer, 20,000,000 are diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea; unmanaged periodontal disease creates a greater risk for hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and low weight premature births, not to mention a life expectancy reduced by some seven years. Dentists can play a major role in screening for sleep apnea (less than 25% of physicians screen); managing oral disease can have a major impact on the quality and length of life. It's amazing how much more effective care

becomes when the patient is a partner in the process merely by saying "Yes".

Q: The patient asks (often), "I really hate going to the dentist; I had a really bad experience as a kid. Is it gonna hurt...again?"

A: So this question lurks, to some extent, in the mind of at least 80% of the patients we see. We have a 1-10 fear scale on our dental health questionnaire and celebrate anyone posting less than a "5." I assume everyone is an "11" and reassure patients that they are ALWAYS in control. I make it clear that they can unconditionally stop everything just by getting my attention; they're the "Spielberg" of their own dental experience. Local anesthetics, following a topical application, are amazing these days. If patients would rather sleep through care, we work with a dental anesthesiologist who can safely provide and manage IV sedation. I'm also amazed by the power of iPods, virtual reality DVDs, massage chairs, pillows, paraffin hand care...and oh yeah, friendly faces and humor. One of our best ever experiences was way more about relationships than a perfect crown, or smile, or Invisalign case; it was a lovely lady battling the limitations of agoraphobia...and driving, for the first time in more than ten years...to our office, with a bottle of Martinelli apple cider to celebrate the transformative trip.

Q: The patient asks (you know they're comfortable now), "Doc, how do you keep up?"

A: Love this one. I always advise folks looking for a new dentist to ask about continuing education, the appearance of the office, and the technology. Doctors who're engaged in the learning process will show it in their passion, enthusiasm, and the investments they make in their practice. A good fit is a doctor who can't wait to share the excitement. And when the passion to learn is real, you'll also see it expressed in a happy, motivated staff.

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