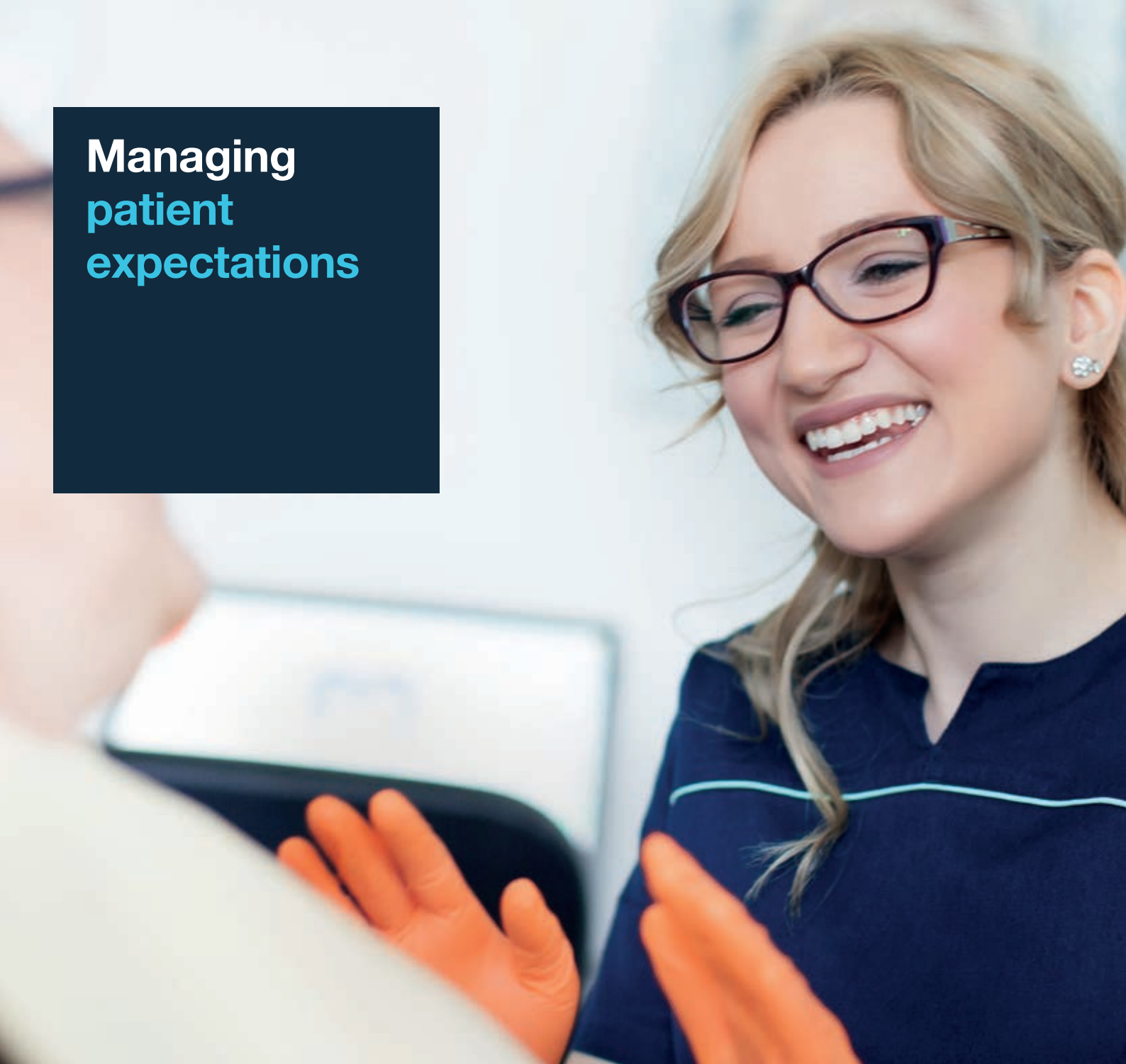


Managing patient expectations



It's well recognised that patients don't necessarily complain simply based on their clinical outcome.

Most dentists will have heard of or seen situations where a patient has experienced an outcome which wasn't ideal yet wasn't particularly poor, however the patient has been quite annoyed with the outcome and has lodged a complaint. On the other hand, there are many cases of patients who have experienced quite poor outcomes yet have chosen to not complain.

There are many reasons why the above may occur, some which are easier to identify than others. All patients are different and human behaviour isn't always predictable. Good communication and the relationship between the patient and dentist

will greatly influence the likelihood of a complaint. One other very important factor is the expectations of patients.

Patient expectations

Many patients will go into dental appointments with some level of expectation regarding their likely outcome. They may have a very clear and detailed outcome in mind or it may be more broad and open. Most importantly, some of these expectations will be realistic, however others won't be.

Unrealistic patient expectations pose very real challenges for dentists. If a patient undergoes treatment which they have unrealistic expectations about, it's unlikely those expectations are going to be met

simply due to them being unrealistic. If a patient's expectations haven't been met, it's likely the patient is going to be unhappy or dissatisfied with the treatment. Those unhappy and dissatisfied patients are the ones more likely to complain about the treatment and expect further corrective treatment or compensation. It's therefore vital that dentists do all they can to help the patient fully understand treatment and the likely and possible treatment outcomes before treatment begins.

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Creating realistic expectations

A key step in making sure a patient has realistic outcomes regarding treatment is to have an open and honest conversation with them. This will not only provide the patient with further information about their treatment, but will also give the dentist a clearer understanding of the patient's expectations. A dentist's clinical skills are vital to what they do, however effective communication goes a long way in providing positive outcomes.

To assist a patient to have realistic expectations, dentists must ensure they explain the treatment and outcomes using simple, clear terms. Technical clinical language should be avoided as many patients won't understand this. Dentists should also consider how they tailor their language and the information for each individual patient. For example, a person with language or literacy challenges may need information presented in a more detailed manner than other patients. Dentists should also consider using diagrams, pictures or models to assist with understanding where appropriate.

When discussing treatment with a patient, it's important that dentists don't make

assumptions about what the patient will or won't understand. It's easy for dentists to become so familiar with what they do and know that they sometimes forget how foreign that knowledge can be to other people. Patients will have varying degrees of knowledge and experience regarding dental treatment. Therefore, what they understand about their treatment will also vary.

When a patient attends a dental clinic and requests a particular form of treatment, this is an occasion when a dentist should be especially mindful of the patient's expected outcome. When a patient has requested a form of treatment, the patient has clearly formed a decision around what treatment they need to get the outcome they desire.

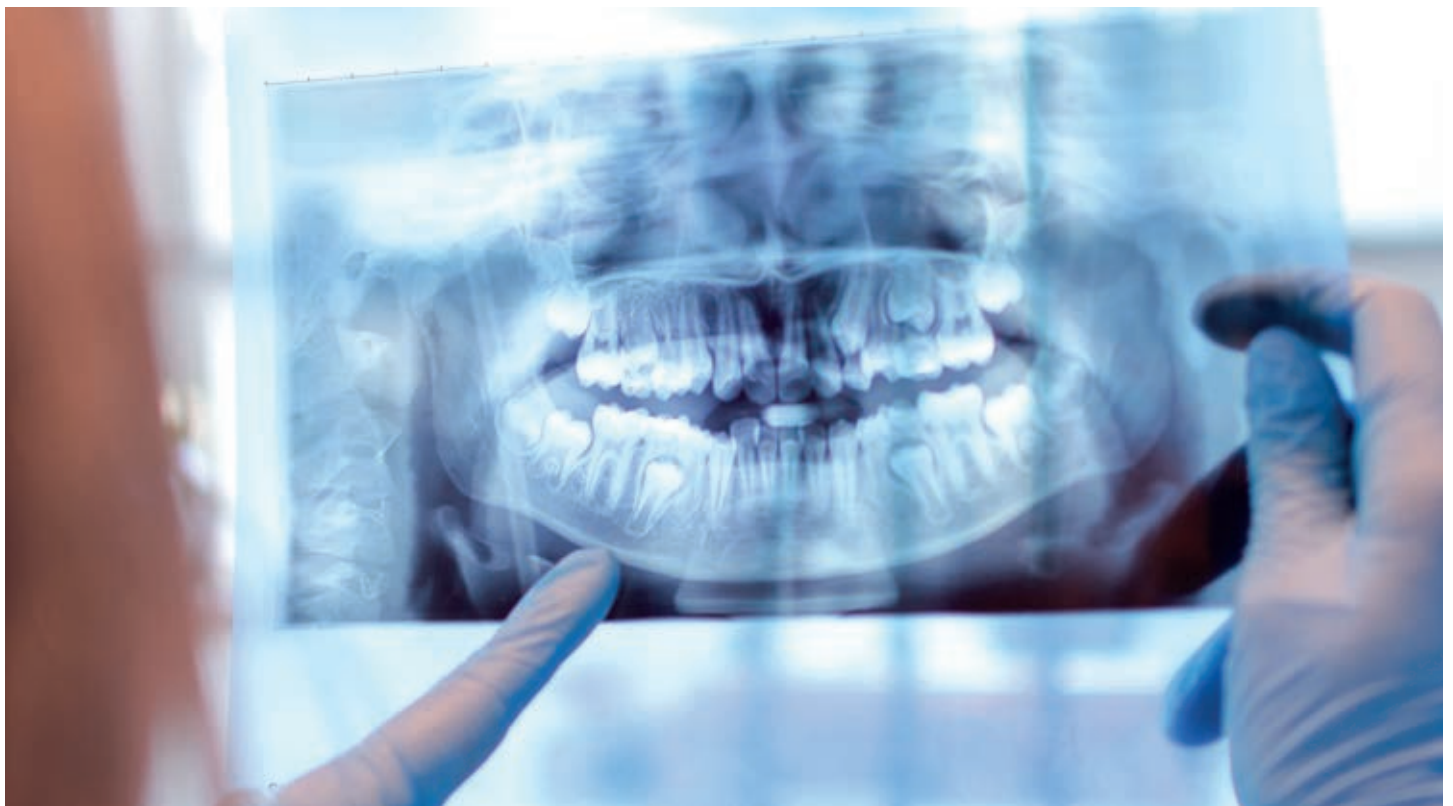
What they're requesting and expecting may be reasonable and realistic, however in some cases it may not be. When presented with this situation, dentists need to be sure they don't rush into providing the patient with the requested treatment. As with all patients, there needs to be a thorough assessment and diagnosis process. Then the patient is to be provided with their treatment options, as well as the risks and benefits of those options. There may be treatment options which are more suitable

for that patient which the patient isn't aware of. The patient also needs to be made aware of the likely treatment outcomes for each of those treatment options.

The dentist needs to be sure the patient has all required information before consenting to treatment and this includes understanding the likely outcomes. A patient requesting particular treatment doesn't alter this required process. And dentists need to remember that they're always responsible for the treatment they've provided, regardless of whether it was requested by a patient.

In summary...

Dentists should be doing all they realistically can to improve the outcomes for their patients and reduce the likelihood of poor outcomes and complaints. An important step in this process is making sure patients have realistic expectations regarding treatment outcomes. Dentists have a very important role in using their clinical knowledge in conjunction with practical terminology to assist patients to develop realistic expectations. Dentists need to remember this is of great benefit to both themselves and their patients.



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