

Money Talk

Who Presents the Fees?

SEND US YOUR COMMENTS!

Have an idea, criticism, comment, or suggestion?

Speak up! We welcome whatever you have to say!

E-mail us at impact@agd.org



Depending who you've spoken with, what you have learned in CE courses, or what you've read in a journal or newsmagazine, the topic of "who presents the fees" has been discussed and debated passionately for a long time. Whether you agree or disagree with the doctor instead of a staff member presenting the fees is not important, because in reality it depends on many circumstances and situations, much like everything else in life and in practice. However, for the sake of discussion, we'll take a stand. And we'd like to hear back from you about this topic. Just e-mail us at impact@agd.org, and we'll be happy to share and respond to your opinions.

The doctor presents the fees

Simply put, the sheer act of presenting the fees is a necessary "moment of truth" in the doctor-patient relationship. When both parties know the commitment on the other person's part, there are no excuses, "he said-she said" discussions, or miscommunications. Generally speaking, most

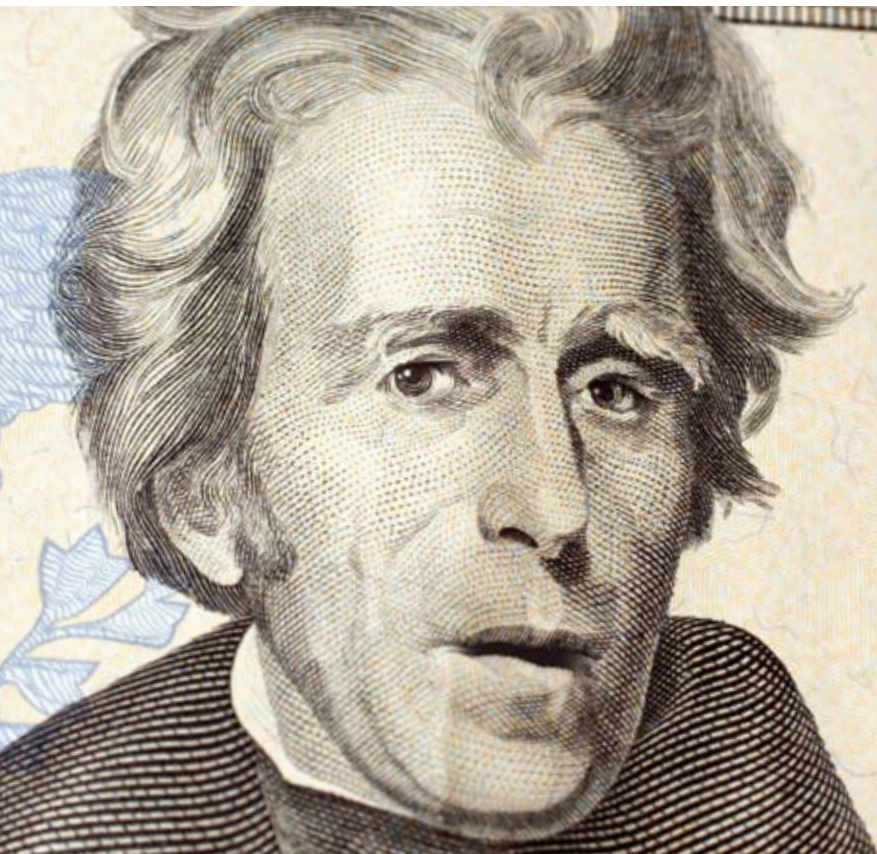
patients are making the most sizable investment in their dental health that they can or are ready to make—and whether the total is \$100 or \$50,000, it's a lot to the patient. By paying careful attention to the details of the treatment and associated fees, you are holding yourself responsible and accountable to both the patient and your team. If you place the task of presenting the fees on a staff member's shoulders, mistakes are bound to occur, and opportunities to provide care will be missed.

Put yourself in the patient's shoes: If you were to choose mostly elective procedures (which a lot of dentistry truly is), how would you feel if the doctor never told you how much it would cost? What would you think of a doctor who wanted to provide services to you but couldn't look you in the eye and tell you what his or her charges would be? Would it instill confidence? How would you interpret his or her compassion toward you? How would you feel toward that doctor if he or she were unable to deliver a less-than-perfect result that you anticipated? How would you feel about the fees then? Would you feel that the doctor was trustworthy? Reliable? Informed? Caring? Accurate? Accountable?

Patients are no different than you and me. They don't have an endless cashflow any more than we do, and they want to be treated as people—not as "cases," "treatment plans," or test models for your developing skills.

We challenge you to consider your answers to the questions above and their implications. Your answers will create greater awareness of your skills, expertise, and judgment, which will allow you to make better choices for your practice. Perhaps you feel that it isn't your place to quote fees. We ask bluntly: why not? Our experience is that many doctors are embarrassed, fear rejection, assume they know how the patient will respond, or just lack the skills to talk openly about the cost of treatment with patients. But if you can be open about the financial aspect of the cost of treatment, it will be less of an obstacle and your relationship with the patient will be stronger.

And by now, you probably know that your relationship with your patients must be strong because dentistry is both an art and a science, and not everything will work out exactly as planned every time. No one is perfect. Your relationship with your patients has to be strong and healthy to weather any and all storms that may arise in the wake of these variables.



When you are comfortable talking about money, your staff members will be as well, and then no one in the office can present the excuse that money was the reason a patient didn't proceed with treatment. You can begin to take a real look at why patients are not accepting your treatment recommendations. You'll be able to talk more openly about money, put the cost of care in perspective, and have a healthy, positive attitude about the patient who is not only receiving treatment, but is paying for your services. It is true that money is a concern—and it always will be.

Don't add fuel to the fire by being unwilling to discuss the money aspects of patients' care. Work with your patients to devise a way for them to receive the care they want and need—perhaps in phases or at one time—using financing to pay for treatment. It's our experience that doctors who are reluctant to talk about money with their patients have more trouble than those who are willing to talk openly about money. Again, we're not suggesting that you are the person who makes payment arrangements.

What about that staff member who feels comfortable presenting the fees for treatment and patients' payment options? Do you see him or her sweating about it? Those staff members are able to stick to the motto: No money, no treatment. But they will work with all patients, no matter what their financial situation, to help the receive treatment. That type of staff member does not let an inevitable payment discussion stop him or her from talking to the patient. But beware—having that type of staff member may make it too easy for the doctor to simply let the staff member handle it. That type of thinking can be a costly mistake.

It also makes it too easy for the patient to say "no" to a staff member, negating and reversing everything you just spent your time, money, and expertise on in an attempt to help him or her—not to mention the patient's valuable time and money to make an appointment to see you. Your staff members do not have the professional degree or dental license to answer the questions your patients may have about treatment or refusal of treatment, and putting staff members in that situation can lead to vicarious liability on your part.

Tough talk

Try something simple, like, "Mrs. Jones, the total cost of your treatment will be \$5,860 and that includes resolving each of the problems and concerns we've discussed in detail." Stop—the next person to talk loses! If you keep blabbering away, Mrs. Jones will know that you're nervous, perhaps unsure or embarrassed, and she may become less confident

"When you are comfortable talking about money, your staff members will be as well, and then no one in the office can present the excuse that money was the reason a patient didn't proceed with treatment."

in you and your abilities as a result. Making a statement, allowing for silence, and then answering all questions for clarification shows real confidence and professionalism. You are not there to talk them into treatment, haggle over the cost, or make excuses for the cost of helping them to resolve their dental problems. The fees are the fees.

Avoid diminishing your professionalism and our profession by playing games with the patient when presenting the fees. We heard of a dentist who would set his fees 10 percent higher, quote the fees, and if the patient hesitated, he would reduce the fee by 10 percent to make the patient feel like he or she was getting a deal. These kinds of tactics can make your patient feel manipulated. Even worse, we have heard patients say they knew their doctor was charging too much because they offered patients a cash discount.

Whether you cite complete treatment costs or treatment costs based on phases of treatment does not matter—just remember to be thorough and complete so that the patient is not surprised and fully understands the complete cost of treatment. For example, we've witnessed patients who were quoted the fee for the placement of an implant

but not for the abutment and crown—an omission that can cause considerable problems. Don't be afraid to give the full fees; it's better to do it now than later through arbitration with a third party.

By taking a thorough look at your own practices, you'll become more aware of what you are doing or not doing. That's where real change starts and where rededication and refocus begins. ♦



Lorraine Guth is a professional speaker and consultant, as well as president of Motivations by Mouth. She conducts management consultations for dentists in both the United States and Canada to improve communication with patients and team members and to improve treatment compliance. Ms. Guth can be reached at 636.257.2066 or at www.motivationsbymouth.com.



Don Deems, DDS, FAGD, known as The Dentist's Coach®, is a professional business coach. His most current book, co-authored with Ken Blanchard and Stephen Covey, is entitled *Roadmap to Success: America's Top Intellectual Minds Map Out Successful Business Strategies*. He can be reached at 501.663.9903 or through his Web site at www.drdondeems.com.

Published with permission by the Academy of General Dentistry.
© Copyright 2008 by the Academy of General Dentistry. All rights reserved.