

Talking to patients—Tips for successful communication

Look at the dialogue and ask yourself: Why does the patient find it difficult to answer?

Dentist : So, you have a pain in your mandible?

Patient : In my...sorry?

Dentist : Your mandible...your lower jaw.

Patient : Oh, yes.

Dentist : Where exactly does it hurt? Please tell me. Is it the temporomandibular joint?

Patient : Uh...here.

Dentist : The left TMJ. I see. When did it start, and how would you describe the pain?

Patient : Umm, I'm not sure...and I don't really know how to explain it.

There are several reasons why this patient couldn't answer smoothly.

1) Most patients do not know much technical vocabulary.

Terms like *mandible* and *TMJ* are basic vocabulary for dentists, but many first-time patients won't understand them. A question like "So, you have a pain in your mandible?" will be confusing if your patient doesn't know what the *mandible* is. As a general rule, don't use technical vocabulary without explaining its meaning, or use simpler terms if possible. In the case of the maxilla and mandible, you can just say *upper jaw* and *lower jaw*. For the TMJ, you could just point and say, "This joint here?"

2) Showing is often easier than telling.

Rather than *telling* you exactly where they have pain, patients often find it easier to *show* you where they have pain, and so often point and say

something like “around this bone” or “this tooth here.” You can encourage this by asking patients “Can you show me where the pain is?” or “Where does it hurt? Can you point to it?”

3) Patients may not remember exactly when their symptoms started.

Especially if the onset was gradual, a patient may be unable to say exactly when their symptoms started. If it was 11 days ago, the patient might only remember this as “more than a week ago” or “about 2 weeks ago.” The longer the elapsed time, the vaguer the patient’s memory is likely to be (Was it 3 months ago? Or 6 months?). If a patient seems unsure, you can help them by making suggestions (“More than 2 weeks?”, “Less than a month?”).

4) Many patients struggle to describe pain in words.

Suffering pain is (hopefully) a rare thing for most people, and not something they usually need to describe in words. “How would you describe the pain?” may be a difficult question to answer. Again, you can help your patients by offering suggestions, such as “How would you describe the pain? Is it a sharp, stabbing pain, or more of a dull, throbbing pain?” or “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst pain you know, how would you rate this pain?”

Summary

- Avoid technical vocabulary.
- When you have to use technical vocabulary, explain its meaning.
- Where necessary, allow patients to show you rather than tell you.
- Suggest words and phrases to help patients answer your questions.

Challenge!! In the dialogue on page 76, how would you talk to the patient if you were the dentist? Rewrite the dialogue using more suitable questions.