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When a Patient Asks a Question

One of the most common characteristics of the busiest practices is that they are led by chiropractors who are good listeners. While many practitioners continue their search for the perfect words, the newest, sure-fire script or procedure, effective chiropractors are listeners. Great listeners. Legendary listeners. They *really* listen. They realize that optimum patient communications isn't about delivering a masterful radiographic report, it's about rigorously listening to the patient. They know that if they can't see the target (revealed by the patient) they are unlikely to hit it.

You're a good listener, right? If you think you are, that's probably proof that you're not.

Being a good listener is only possible if you're not talking. Most chiropractors, so high on their adjusting prowess, the benefits of chiropractic, or merely their desire to serve, gush all over the patient. They can hardly wait for patients to pause long enough during the recounting of their various brushes with ineffective prescriptions, or stoic medical doctors to tell the wonders of chiropractic. Those chiropractors endure only what's necessary to make themselves appear interested enough to warrant the patient's trust. In the process, they make the experience about themselves, instead of the patient.

It's no wonder that those chiropractors take a defensive posture when patients ask a question. Since the relationship is about them, not their patients, they assume the questions are an attack, a form of doubt, or a sign that patients lack a complete acceptance of the chiropractic catechism. Tragically, assigning the wrong meaning to patient questions practically dooms the relationship to a short-term, superficial episode of natural pain relief.

Still contend you're a good listener?

If you are, then you'll agree that an optimum new patient experience is one in which you've thought through the process from a patient's point of view to such a degree that you anticipate most, if not every, patient question. Good job! But what does it mean when a patient asks questions on subsequent visits?

"How much longer am I going to need chiropractic care?"

"Why do I see so many children coming in here?"

"Why doesn't my insurance policy cover everything you recommend?"

"How can chiropractic help health problems other than neck and back pain?"

"Can your adjustments make the bones move too much?"

The list of possible questions goes on and on. Many chiropractors misread the patient's intention prompting the question and short-circuit the opportunity it presents. What does a patient's question mean? Here are some possibilities:

- 1. They're engaged.** Congratulations! You have a patient who is present enough to what you're saying and doing to want to know more. That's good news. It's hardly a reason to get defensive. It's a reason to celebrate. Apparently you've engaged the superior portion of your patient's nervous system: his or her brain. Patients who ask questions, regardless of their implications, are more promising than patients who seal themselves off and don't permit a deeper connection to grow.
- 2. They feel safe.** Patients who ask questions feel safe enough from judgment, criticism or ridicule to lower their guard and ask them. Remember in school being told that there's no such thing as a dumb question? We didn't believe it then and we certainly don't today. Asking a question risks looking bad, stupid, or both. The fact that patients are willing to ask is a good sign. How you respond will determine whether they will continue to ask them or write you off as a selfish blowhard.
- 3. They're making changes.** One of the possible meanings you could attach to patient questions is that they're taking your lecturing and teaching overtures to heart and are in the process of changing their beliefs. Changing from a blood-focused, germ-fearing, pill-popping, symptom-treating focus to a nerve-focused, cause-based model of health is a messy process. What about this? What about that? Patient questions could mean you're changing their cerebral cortexes along with their spinal biomechanics. Good job!
- 4. They likely have others.** Few questions travel alone. They almost always have company. More significantly, many questions cover up the real question. For example: When a patient raises a question about the cost of your X-rays, it may actually hide a concern about radiation exposure, or vice versa. So, when you're asked a question, slow down. When you respond too quickly, in an attempt to show off your knowledge or confidence, or to strike back because you see it as an attack, you may overlook the *real* question.

Clearly, patient questions are important. They're so important that they ask you, and then trot out to the front desk and ask your staff. They got the "company line" from you, and now they're going to ask a *real* person. It's helpful if your answers and those of your staff have a similar ring. When they don't, the uncertainty casts doubt on you and everything else you've said!

Action Step #1: Become a collector of questions. Spend a couple of weeks recording the questions your staff is asked at the front desk and on the telephone. Collect the questions you're asked at your consultations, examinations and reports. Then get to work, role-playing with your staff. Make sure everyone is confident and consistent.

Action Step #2: Turn the number of questions you're asked into a statistic. If questions are an indicator of your patients' engagement, and the processing of some new beliefs (the forerunner to more healthful behaviors), it would seem that they would be something worth keeping track of.

Can't really remember any patient questions? Then, you're not listening or patients don't feel safe asking. Or both!

About Patient Media, Inc.

Patient Media, Inc. supplies patient-relevant videos, brochures, charts, posters, report documents, lectures, postcards and patient newsletters for the chiropractic profession. As the exclusive source of patient communication tools from William Esteb, help your patients "get it" by using the simple concepts and high-impact graphics at www.patientmedia.com.