

Informed Consent

The anniversary of my 50th graduation from dental school has long passed and over those years I hope that I have learned a lot. I could have learned more! I hope that I will always remember one day in my early years in the clinic. The waiting room was full of patients and their caregivers and there was a young child who was an emergency case, with the usual “bombed out” tooth which should have been taken care long ago. As always, I thought to myself “Why did the family not bring this child to us before? It is such a shame the mother did not bring the patient earlier.”

Since the line was long, I was in a hurry as I tried to explain to the mother what I was going to do. I explained that I was going to try to save the tooth since it would be a long time until the next one was going to come in and the space needed to be saved. It was the usual statement we give to the parents. I remembered to use the word “nerve” instead of “pulp” and I told her I was going to remove the nerve, and hoped the pain would go away. If it did not go away, I would have to extract the tooth. The mother looked to me with suffering eyes and said “Doc, please do what is best for my child. If you don’t want to extract, you can also take the tooth out.”

That is when I noticed I had failed.

Unfortunately, we sometimes get so comfortable with our terminology, and sometimes we are in a hurry. We need to bear in mind that the relationship between the patient and the health professional is an integral part of the treatment plan. In the past, on certain occasions a health professional could treat a patient without an explanation, and this was considered proper. Times have changed and professional principles and better understanding are now in place. We no longer treat patients without an explanation and without consideration of their need to understand the type of treatment to be provided. We no longer are allowed to test a hypothesis without an explanation or consideration of the desires of the patient.

It might take a little bit of extra time but when ethical principles are in place, this is part of the professional standards that are in order. It is important to make sure that patients (and caregivers) understand the potential outcomes and potential risks. Thank Heavens we are in the 21st century.

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