



# You will enjoy big rewards for the extra-oral treatment of patients

By Julie Parker

**T**he dental restrictions of the pandemic response have resulted in many patients either unable or unwilling to attend for their usual treatment. Dental practices have responded by reaching out to their patients to help guide them through this (hopefully) short-term interruption to their oral care.

Thinking about how best to support patients while not physically treating them, I have been reminding myself of the enormous value we can still offer.

When I was a dental patient facilitator, I was part of a team that spent a good deal of time in discussions with patients. We understood that dentistry is not simply a mouth entering the clinic, determining what is needed and powering on through the service. There was a person attached to that mouth and that person had thoughts, beliefs, anxieties, concerns and desires. Part of our responsibility with our patients was to ensure we helped them understand their oral condition, the treatment options available to them and answer their questions and concerns so they were able to make informed choices.

Crucial to this process was conducting “enquiring conversations”:

- Discovering what was important to our patients;
- What was relevant to their decision-making; and
- Helping them identify what they wanted for themselves dentally for the future.

These conversations took time. Depending upon the complexity of the treatment plan, often a lot of time. And it is this element of patient care that can continue regardless of restrictions.

It is my hope that by the time this issue of Australasian Dental Practice Magazine has arrived in your mailbox, dental practices are back to seeing patients as normal. But either way, the opportunity to more effectively engage with your patients remains.

My suggestion to you is to design systems of communication between your team and your patients that will achieve greater understanding, education and facilitation of your patients through the preparatory journey before actual treatment begins.

This journey can be conducted either in-person, online or a combination of the two. For the purposes of this article, let’s focus on the online journey.

There are three prime opportunities:

## 1. Patients with outstanding treatment

**R**each out to your patients who have not yet committed to advised treatment. Call them and ask how they are managing with their oral condition. Offer them a no-charge virtual consultation of 30-minutes (longer if needed) so you can ensure they are doing what they can to mitigate any risk of their condition worsening.

Once online, share your Zoom screen and remind them of the details of their condition with charting, images and radiographs.

The purpose is to have a conversation with the patient where the following areas are covered:

- Identification of condition;
- Explanation of ramifications should the condition be left untreated;

- Information regarding the treatment solutions available to them;
- Asking for patient feedback and conversation to reveal and address questions and concerns; and
- Making a plan for the future (this plan could be the patient opting for ideal treatment, compromised or short-term treatment or no treatment at all).

Often, the patient will want some time to think about their options before making a final decision. You can supply them with a recording of your virtual consultation and an emailed summary of their options so they have continual access to the information they need. Organise a time for a follow-up session or telephone call to check-in and either answer questions or schedule in time for treatment (even if it is a recall appointment). I urge you to appreciate that patients who do not understand your recommendations will not be able to remember your advice! Just test this in your own life when your car mechanic is trying to explain something to you!

## 2. Patients with deferred treatment

**Y**ou may have patients who have agreed to treatment but have had to defer their appointment due to the restrictions.

Contact these patients and offer a virtual appointment to check in on them and ensure their condition is not worsening. Offer them advice on how to conduct effective home-care to keep themselves in a holding pattern until they can attend for treatment.

It is important to keep these patients engaged in their scheduled treatment plans.

### 3. Recalls

**R**ather than simply deferring your recall appointments, set up a virtual consultation. Ask them how they are functioning. Address any concerns that they might have. Use your mouth model and go through oral hygiene instruction.

I believe that virtual consultations have the potential to remain a part of your patient management systems beyond COVID-19. They are an efficient, productive and effective method of engaging with your patients and helping them to a higher level of understanding of what dentists are all about.

Virtual consultations offer a range of benefits over a standard telephone call:

- Patients can open wide and show you a chipped tooth, puffy gums or a swollen face;
- A substantial amount of communication is non-verbal, that is, your body language, facial expressions and physical mannerisms. Your ability to understand your patient and their ability to

understand you is more effectively achieved with a virtual consultation;

- You are better able to build effective rapport with somebody when you can actually see each other;

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- A virtual screen allows you to show the patient radiographs, pictures, educational videos and diagrams - even your own sketchings;
- Virtual consultations can be recorded for the patient; and

- Patients will be more relaxed and open with you when they are located in the comfort of their own home.

Another opportunity is team training. Use the recordings of your virtual consultations as a teaching tool for your team members, so they can start to participate in the successful educational and engagement of your practice’s patients.

Providing care to patients is more than intra-oral treatment alone. Using the virtual online space could be a chance to provide the EXTRA-oral care that ensures your practice is better than ever before and the extra value you create for your patients will generate increased rewards for you.

#### About the author

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