



# Are you guilty of killing your own practice in this way?

By Julie Parker

**H**ave you been flossing every day, as I suggested six months ago?  
*“You should have come and had this tooth treated sooner. Now the decay has reached the nerve.”*

*“I can see a fair bit of evidence that you have neglected your teeth over the years.”*

*Shame, shame, shame.*

Over the years, I’ve witnessed conversations with patients about their poor oral hygiene and lack of attention to their oral condition. From the practitioner’s perspective, they are simply gathering data and speaking about their findings. However, the patient can be interpreting the experience quite differently.

In a recent social media post, Angus Pryor, a dental practice marketing expert and fellow contributor of articles to this magazine, posted a question to the public about the reasons behind their dental attendance behaviour.

One of the respondents stated that she used to attend six-monthly maintenance visits for years until a new hygienist continually “shamed” her for not flossing. This lady said she was “done” and stopped attending the practice. It took 13 years for her to return and get back into the six-monthly rhythm.

Patients provide clues that they fear being judged for their management of their oral health. When asked about the frequency of their flossing, they lie and say “nearly every day”. Infrequent attendees start their conversation in the surgery with, “just to warn you, you’re

going to see all kinds of problems in my mouth”. Some patients even apologise to the practitioner, as if it is the practitioner who bears the repercussions of the poor oral care, not the patient.

One reason why dental practitioners judge their patients may be that they gain a sense of superiority over another in order to feel better about themselves - this is not limited to dentistry and is the reason many of us judge others in various situations.

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Another, more common reason is habit and so the practitioner simply requires more helpful communication skills when speaking about topics that have the potential to make their patients feel judged and shamed.

Even simply becoming aware of the impact on patients should they feel judged is a big step in the right direction.

If we transposed the communication to a different scenario, it might make us appreciate patient shame and anxiety a little more.

Imagine that you’re substantially overweight. There are reasons you have neglected your physical health. You had small children to raise and a business to manage, as well as an injury that made exercise difficult. But, now it is a high priority to get your health back in order. You know it’s going to be uncomfortable and possibly a little embarrassing, but you schedule a physical with your doctor to get the advice you need to make a plan to get healthy.

You turn up to the appointment and explain your situation. The doctor weighs you, performs a skin-fold test, asks you the details of what you eat and how frequently you consume calories. You admit how infrequently you exercise.

During the examination, your doctor makes comments such as, “I can see why your knee is still causing trouble; you are carrying too much weight”, and “Why don’t you simply exercise in the mornings? Then you’re done for the day”.

Accurate commentary, but not helpful.

You’re sitting there, at the mercy of this doctor, who displays only mild traits of compassion and doesn’t seem to understand the concept of “motivation”.

You leave feeling disheartened, but at least you ripped the bandaid off.

The preferred alternative outcome in this scenario is that you leave the doctor’s office feeling elated, inspired and hopeful. The doctor was delighted by your decision to come for a physical because that’s exactly why he became a doctor: to help you to be healthier! Your doctor is excited to work with you to achieve your goals.

Now, what would have needed to happen during your physical for the alternative outcome to be the reality?

The doctor would have needed to:

- Practice compassionate enquiry as to what led you to his office and what you were hoping to achieve;
- Recognise the impact of self-worth in such a situation and to make encouraging comments such as “I admire you for taking an important step in your health” and “there are many resources you can use to reach your goal. I know you will be successful!”; and
- Collaborate with you to design and establish the plan back to better health.

As in the scenario, you want patients to come in for examination and advice. You want your patients to schedule their appointments and practice home care. You want them committed to the goal.

So, what can your practice do to encourage patients who fear judgement?

1. Introduce as one of your core practice values “Zero Criticism”. Bring the whole dental team into the process and shift the behaviour of the practice to a judgement-free culture;
2. Gain feedback from your team, family and friends as to what behaviour can be easily construed by patients to be that of

judgement. Discuss and role-play with your team alternative communications that will instead show the patient they are worthy, acceptable and should feel optimistic for a healthier mouth;

3. Allocate more time for examinations of patients who have not been for some years so you can practice effective enquiry of each patient’s unique situation;
4. Offer “come in for a chat” consultations. These are sessions for patients who already feel ashamed about their oral condition and would jump at the chance to discuss their circumstances without the anxiety of having the oral examination performed. The patient will have the opportunity to get to know, like and trust you before taking this next step;
5. Organise team-development sessions where you discuss and role-play what can be done to show patients warmth and support and how each team member can play a role in facilitating patients thoughtfully through their dental experiences; and
6. Conduct open information nights at your practice for your patients and other members of the community to

come and discover different elements of dental care. No check-ups, no interrogations. Broad information that everyone can use, delivered in a completely judgement-free environment.

Dental patients avoid attending their visits for several reasons. Low finances, time constraints and a low sense of importance over their oral health. As a practitioner, you have limited control or influence over these factors. However, patients avoiding dental care because they fear being judged can be a practice killer.

There is an opportunity here, though. If you became known in your community as the “Zero Criticism” practice, you may have just identified a large and untapped market.

### About the author

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