

# SURLY STAFF DENTAL OFFICE

BY BRUCE A. STEPHENSON

## “Surly Staff Dental Office. What do you want?”

These weren't the actual words but they were certainly the tone I heard when I telephoned a specialty dental office recently. I immediately felt angry, disappointed, frustrated, and anxious and had a very bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. In spite of all these feelings, I went ahead and arranged for my patient to see the specialist who is extremely skilled and from whom my patients always receive superior clinical care. But what about their emotional care?

It turned out my patient was smarter than I was. About an hour later, she returned to my office and requested the name of another specialist. “I really, really liked the doctor but the staff was so rude that I don't want to go back there!” She was perceptive enough to understand a surly staff would spoil any chance she had for a good treatment experience. This patient eventually saw a specialist in another city but one who was sharp enough to understand the vital role his staff members play in creating positive patient interactions.

This incident got me thinking about my referrals and how the patient's bad experiences reflect back on me. When I refer someone to a specialist, the specialist's office essentially becomes an extension of my own. If the patient has a miserable time with that office, the experience gets transferred back to me. When the patient is unhappy,

I look bad. I lose the trust of that patient. That patient is less likely to pay my bill on time. I lose any chance of referrals from that patient. I also run a much greater risk of being sued.

The age-old axiom says that malpractice suits happen because of “bad manners and bad results.” Unfortunately, we all have occasional “bad results.” We're human beings treating other human beings. In spite of our best efforts, stuff happens. But “bad manners” should never happen! There is never an adequate excuse, either from the doctor or the staff. It is bad practice management. It demeans our patients. And it increases our chances of a malpractice suit.

In his book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell discusses studies done to predict the likelihood of malpractice suits for physicians. Tape-recorded conversations between physicians and patients were analyzed, then later correlated with the actual malpractice experience of the physicians in the study. The best predictor of a subsequent malpractice suit turned out to be the tone of voice the physicians used in discussions with their patients. It was not the actual words spoken or even the quality of the treatment outcome. When the conversations were electronically garbled so actual words said could not be discerned, the tone of voice used during the conversation was enough to predict the risk of malpractice suits. The tone of the conversations between staff and patients is almost as important as those with the doctor. Other studies found patients are very reluctant to sue doctors they feel are their friends, even when bad results happen. How “friendly” do you suppose the patients of my specialist feel towards that office? How “friendly” do you suppose they feel toward me when they return?

Unfortunately, bad manners occasionally happen even in well-run offices. Even my own! When a staff person displays anything less than a perfect attitude with a patient, we need to deal with it! There are always great excuses: “I had a fight with my husband (wife,

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# CONSULTANT'S CORNER

girlfriend, the cleaners, etc.);” “I got a ticket coming to work;” “I couldn’t sleep last night and I’m tired.”...And a million more! As a good people manager, we should listen to the excuse and allow the guilty party to “vent.” Then we should use the magic word taught to me by a very talented industrial psychologist: “*Nevertheless*.” “I am truly sorry you had a fight with your husband, *nevertheless*, I will not tolerate rude behavior from anyone in our office. Please don’t let it happen again.” “*Nevertheless*” is the bridge between hearing the excuse and saying, politely, the behavior is not acceptable. It’s a very non-confrontational way to prevail in a needed confrontation. “But everyone has a bad day!” “*Nevertheless*, you have a professional responsibility to put on your “game face” every single time you deal with a patient. Please see it doesn’t happen again.”

Actress Helen Hayes gave her audience a great performance every time, irrespective of what was happening in her personal life. President Theodore Roosevelt finished the last 12 minutes of a campaign speech after a would-be assassin shot him in the chest. Our jobs are not that tough! Our determination to provide friendly, helpful, polite, empathetic, and concerned interactions with each patient must override our occasional bad moods. Yes, sometimes we have to “stuff those feelings,” smile, and put on a

Helen Hayes great performance! And it’s really a whole lot easier than finishing a speech with a fresh gunshot wound! It’s also a vital part of all of our jobs. A surly staff person should not work in a dental office! Period! The employee will hurt the practice and may easily end up getting the doctor sued! “But Sue has worked at the front desk for 23 years!” *Nevertheless*, if she won’t change, she needs to be replaced. Please do it before you end up in court. 

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