

Editorial

CARE FOR THE FUTURE?



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Prompted by a conference I attended recently, I have been thinking a lot about the evolution of the clinician–patient interaction. Often characterized by paternalism, the nature of this interaction has been changed by consumerism, which threatens to put health care providers on the defensive. Some knowledgeable authors speak of a partnership between the provider and the recipient of care as a desirable basis for this relationship in the future.

In the spirit of promoting this type of partnership, I wish, wherever practical, to include links in *eJCDA* to information for patients or their caregivers. To get the ball rolling on this initiative, my idea was to seek patient-focused information related to the cleft palate article (p. 688) in this special edition devoted to oral and maxillofacial surgery. My search led me to the

coordinator of a provincial cleft palate program.

I feel privileged to have met some people in my life whom I consider to be “great” or special. These invariably are not famous people, but people who distinguish themselves in my eyes because of the care and passion they exhibit in doing what they do. The lady coordinating this program, a registered nurse, is one of these great people, who clearly cares deeply for children with cleft palate and their caregivers.

She spoke to me about clinician–recipient interactions in her program and provided me with insights into their evolution. With cleft palate, there is a need to deal with family members with great sensitivity, as one side of the family may be blaming the other side for the “bad genes” that led to the disfiguring condition.

Busy specialists don't always have the time to answer all the questions that the family members, invariably under great stress, need to ask. The vigilant nurse will contact family members days later to draw out the unasked questions that didn't occur to them during the encounter with the specialists. Making sure family members properly understood what the specialists said is another very important aspect of ongoing care.

The coordinator of the cleft palate program told me that she noticed family members are becoming more “bold” in their questioning of specialists. She also spoke of the need for a written contract between the family and care providers, so that everyone knows what is expected of them during the course of treatment.

Our conversation kept reminding me of the aforementioned conference, called *The Universe of the Future Patient: Anticipating Our Health System in 2010* (www.parkpub.com/healthcare). This conference identified

3 phenomena that will dictate the nature of the health care provider–recipient interaction in the future: electronically based health care; the empowered patient; and new science, based on data uncovered by the Human Genome Project.

The electronic health record is the cornerstone of electronically based health care. Many presenters spoke of the importance of pertinent health care providers and the patient being able to access the electronic patient record where, when and how they wish (maybe even in a health clinic at their local supermarket). I believe that it will be important for dentists to have access to relevant sections of the e-record of their patients, even if we are outside the Canadian public health care system.

Patients and their advocacy groups, especially those dealing with people suffering from chronic conditions, are using the Internet to gather and circulate information about these conditions and about health care providers. I believe that smart health-related professional associations will ally with health advocacy groups, in their mutual interest. In dealing with the empowered patient, we can be assured that informed consent will be a major issue for the dentist of the future, as well as what I call “the co-management of oral conditions.”

New science will allow clinicians to focus more on the identification of patients at risk to conditions. Practitioners will initiate more individualized prevention programs for these patients. In many ways, the patient–provider encounter of the future is daunting. However, it could be very satisfying for those who genuinely act as partners with the people seeking their services.

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