



Changing the Old Narratives about Dental Clinic Visitation: A Wake-Up Call for Dental Professionals

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"There is nothing wrong with my teeth, why should I visit the dental clinic".

"At the dental clinic, all they do is have your tooth pull out and leave you in pain".

As an oral health professional, it's not unusual to receive these kinds of comments whenever I asked people about their last visit to the dental clinic. To some people, my questions sometimes seem strange to them and many see dental professionals as weird scary creatures who probably seek joy in people's pain and blood.

Compared to general medicine, where having a slight headache would make a mother panic over her child and have her immediately taken to the hospital for proper treatment, the case is opposite in dentistry, in absence of severe toothache or swollen jaw, then all dental cases are still manageable or overlooked.

In Nigeria, this is becoming a nightmare for many dental professionals. As a result of low patient turnout, many dental clinics have been shut down, leaving professionals jobless and forced to look into another career. Being a dental professional myself, it saddens me to see the majority of my colleagues unable to practice in their chosen field, and it saddens me more to see the masses with poor oral health and negligence in taking care of it.

In a quest to search for solutions, I realized the major problem comes from the same repeated old stories that have been passed down from generations about Dental treatments. I interviewed 100 different people across the country about their views on Dental clinics visitation for check-up.

More than half of the respondents feel it's unnecessary and a waste of time as they would visit a dental clinic only when the need arises and 40% of the respondents were simply afraid of pain and this stopped them from visiting even when they have tooth problems. They prefer the use of local herbs mostly concocted with alcohol and other toxic substances for short term relief which makes it worse and results in secondary infections. 4 out of 5 complained of the high costs of visiting a Dental clinic.

Ignorance, fear and high costs

Drawing conclusions from my interviews, I realized these three factors: Ignorance, fear and high costs are major hindrances to people visiting a dental clinic.

As mentioned earlier, repeated old stories have it that you only visit dental clinics only when you have a severe toothache or mouth problem. These three factors are related to each other. When people keep false beliefs and are ignorant of the truth, they tend to fear the unknown which further complicate things. And when things get complicated, the solution becomes expensive. Without proper action, these narratives will most likely continue and become hardened beliefs which will in turn affect Dentistry badly as a profession. To avoid that, we as dental professionals need to replace the false and old beliefs with the true one.

Individual awareness and enlightenment

The first step to changing old beliefs about dental clinic visitation is proper individual Awareness and Enlightenment on part of a dental professional. Whether you are a Dentist, dental hygienist, dental technician or a dental nurse, we all have a significant role to play.

- A layman should be properly educated on why dental check-ups are important, and that a dental visit isn't about removing one's tooth or experiencing pain.
- As regards previous patient's experiences which may seem terrible and unpleasant, especially children, dental professionals should try to communicate well and help allay the patient's fears. Building trust and rapport with patients that suffer from dental anxiety requires them to know that you understand what they are going through.
- The use of harmful and toxic substances in treating dental problems should be politely addressed and discouraged.

Community and school-based oral health programs

Organizing an oral health program either in community or school helps improve not only oral health of the masses but also creates a kind of trust and confidence in the dental team. At schools, the students, after being enlightened and allowed to practice what they were taught, will be eager to narrate their wonderful experiences with the dental team to their parents or guardians at home, and as a result remind and urge their families to visit the dental clinic for check-ups.

At communities, especially the rural communities, the people will feel a sense of belonging and will appreciate the efforts of the dental team. They won't mind the distance at which they would have to cover to reach the nearest dental clinic just because of the beautiful experiences they've had.

Social media outreach

The internet can be used in a number of ways to increase more visits to the dental clinic. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn can be used to create valuable dental contents and awareness which can attract users and help them understand better the reason why they need to come for a dental check-up at the Clinic. Contents like proper brushing techniques, flossing, healthy foods for teeth and plaque removal process will pique the interest of the viewers and encourage them to make a trip to the dental clinic.

Addressing the high costs of visiting a dental clinic

"Dentistry is not expensive but neglect definitely is" - Dr. Rushad Nariman.

As dental professionals, we can't get enough of "dental treatments are too expensive". Yes, for a lot of reasons, it can be costly but it should be communicated appropriately to the masses that negligence on their part is the major reason why dental care can be so expensive. Regular visits to the dental clinic will help save costs by preventing or detecting a dental problem at an early stage. Negligence will only makes it worse thereby increasing treatment costs.

Conclusion

As dental professionals, we have major work to do in changing false narratives about dental clinic visitation. We should strive to

be at our best at all times, especially when meeting new people. We should also advocate dentistry to the best of our abilities so as to encourage and win more trips to our practice.

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