

THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN DENTAL PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

Communication in the dental office is the basis for the patient's trust in their dentist, especially as the patient is in a physically and emotionally vulnerable state, on the one hand, but is becoming increasingly well-informed, on the other. He is no longer just a spectator of the medical act, dentists take the time to listen carefully and take their concerns and fears seriously, in order to have more satisfied patients. Patient satisfaction is improved when medical staff pay attention to verbal and nonverbal communication [1]. Through effective and empathetic communication, creating a sense of security, a good relationship is established between medical staff and patient, essential for obtaining their compliance [2].

The first contact between the patient and the dental practice is the basis of the communication process. Patients usually find out through a recommendation or simply by walking past and observing the practice. It is important that, regardless of how it was established, the first contact leaves the patient with a good first impression.

The second contact takes place when patients make an appointment: via the online appointment tool or over the

Communication begins with the first contact and extends throughout the entire visit, and it is important for the dentist to use both verbal and non-verbal communication, creating a safe and accessible environment. Explaining procedures in simple language helps reduce anxiety and promotes collaboration. Non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact) plays a significant role in patient comfort, especially for those who are anxious or have special needs. It also allows for the detection of signs of discomfort or pain, adjusting treatment in real time. Empathy, respect for patient rights, and awareness of cultural differences are essential for building a relationship of trust. The cross-sectional study conducted in Timiș County highlighted that patients perceive communication as effective, but there are differences in the facial expressions and listening skills of medical staff. The results show that most patients are satisfied with dental treatments and would recommend the services to others. The conclusion is that improving nonverbal communication can contribute to more effective and comfortable care, especially for patients with anxiety or language barriers.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, eye contact, body language, nonverbal feedback, doctor-patient relationship, therapeutic relationship, cultural differences, patient rights, patient satisfaction, communication barrier

phone. The first in-person contact between the patient and the dentist usually takes place on the day of the appointment or over the phone, in the case of smaller dental practices where the doctor makes the appointments himself [3]. When patients present themselves at the dental practice, the practice team welcomes them and records their (medical) data. Subsequently, the interaction with the dentist is the last point of contact, when carrying out the consultation or treatment. This also involves a series of activities and discussions aimed at improving communication, increasing patient satisfaction and ensuring efficient and personalized care [4].

Creating positive expectations, expressing the possible consequences of the treatment appropriately and not in a negative way (pay attention to communicating risks and negative effects). There is also the nocebo effect, in addition to the placebo effect. A study in this regard revealed that patients experienced the negative side effects they were told about, even though the drugs had no effect in this regard from a medical point of view [5,6].

During the conversation, it is the dentist's duty to provide a certain communication structure and establish a connection with the patient. He/she must also pay attention to nonverbal communication. Certain gestures are considered friendly: nodding, smiling, and regularly agreeing with what the patients have to say. The doctor's posture should suggest openness: both feet on the floor and not crossing their arms. Maintaining eye contact is essential. Throughout the entire meeting, patients should feel that the doctor is always present and attentive. Therefore, it is necessary for the dentist to take his/her time, listen carefully, and let his/her patients finish speaking. In return, the patient has the duty to provide all the necessary information. It is also very important to use strategic pauses to encourage the patient to speak [7].

Communication during the examination is also extremely important. Here, verbal communication is mostly carried out. The dentist explains step by step the treatment performed, which dental instrument he will use

and how the treatment will proceed. Medical terms are often unknown to patients and can cause them discomfort. Instead, it is recommended to use words that a layperson can easily understand, for successful communication [8,9].

When communicating, the doctor plays the role of a transmitter who encodes a message and transmits it through a certain channel. The patient thus becomes the receiver who decodes that message. Of course, for various reasons, the message is almost never understood exactly as it was intended. This is due to the fact that each receiver decodes messages in their own way. Thus, it must be taken into account that messages always have several "layers".

Regardless of the activities in which the doctor or his team are involved, it is necessary to remember that they are always communicating with patients, even when they are not speaking [6-10]. Body language, gestures or facial expressions are included in what is meant by nonverbal communication. The doctor and his entire team must take into account the principles of nonverbal communication: that it can be inconsistent, that the reading of signs differs, that nonverbal communication is reliable even when it is unintentional and that it is easy to be misunderstood. Given these principles, it must be borne in mind that not all individuals are equally capable of understanding nonverbal communication, nonverbal styles vary due to situations, different cultures, different personalities, but also due to different life experiences. Other variables can also influence the way a person transmits or perceives a message. Women tend to be better readers of nonverbal messages, partly because women are more emotionally inclined than men [7,8].

Attention to nonverbal communication in dental care is of paramount importance for several reasons: to build patient trust and comfort, to combat anxiety and stress related to visiting the dentist [11-15], to understand patients' needs and preferences, and to improve diagnostic and treatment processes by strengthening the therapeutic relationship through effective communication. Nonverbal communication can help minimize miscommunication and misunderstandings in dental care. Increased attention to patients' nonverbal cues allows dental professionals to clarify ambiguous messages, ensure patient understanding, and promptly address any misconceptions. This promotes information exchange between the doctor and patient and reduces the likelihood of treatment-related complications.

Through effective nonverbal communication, dental professionals can create a patient-centered environment, improve overall communication, strengthen the therapeutic relationship, and improve diagnostic and treatment processes, ultimately contributing to improved patient experiences and the overall quality of oral care.

OBJECTIVES:

- Analyzing the role and importance of nonverbal communication in the doctor-patient relationship in dental offices
- Evaluating the perception of doctor-patient communication
- Evaluating the perception of nonverbal communication in dental services

- Evaluating the perception of the empathy capacity of medical personnel in dental offices
- Evaluating the perception of respecting patients' rights and their cultural principles.
- Perception of the effectiveness of communication.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To carry out this retrospective observational study, conducted in 7 different dental offices in Timiș County between October and November 2022, a questionnaire consisting of three parts was used as an instrument: socio-demographic data (age, gender, background, education), data on the patient's experience related to communication in the dentist's office and data related to nonverbal communication (NVC) were collected.

The questions related to the patients' previous experiences during visits to the dentist aimed, first of all, at the assessment of NVC and the effectiveness of communication, using the Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 being completely disagree and 5 being completely agree). Patients were asked to rate whether the dentist communicated effectively and not just verbally, whether they maintained eye contact, whether they had a warm and friendly facial expression and soothing body language, whether the dentist listened attentively, whether there was touching that they perceived as appropriate (for comforting, for example), whether their privacy and personal space were respected, and whether the attitude of the medical staff was positive and supportive.

Questions related to patient perceptions of communication effectiveness assessed whether the dentists effectively communicated treatment options and procedures, whether they explained any possible discomfort or unpleasant sensation that the patient may experience, whether patients felt encouraged to ask questions, and whether their concerns and worries were understood, thus overall feeling that they communicated effectively and received sufficient information from the dentists.

There were also multiple-choice questions in which patients specified how they perceived the attending physician, whether they considered their rights, beliefs and cultural needs to be respected, and whether they would recommend that dental office.

At the end of the questionnaire, patients were asked whether and to what extent they suffer from anxiety during visits to the dental office, using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 being not at all anxious and 5 being extremely anxious).

The questionnaire was distributed to the 7 dental offices during the period October-November 2022. A total of 123 questionnaires were distributed and a total of 89 questionnaires were fully completed. Of those 89 completed questionnaires, 6 were eliminated because they had over 50% non-response. Thus, the final batch consisted of the 83 questionnaires completed in a proportion greater than 50%.

After selecting the study group, a database was created using Excel 365. The group was analyzed descriptively using Excel 365, and the statistical comparison analysis was performed with SPSS. The mean, median, mode and standard deviation were analyzed.



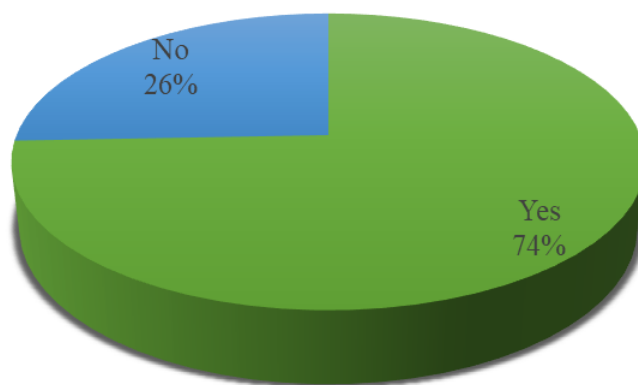
RESULTS

- The mean age of the group is 49.3 years ± 18.7 years, with a minimum of 19 years and a maximum of 69 years;
- 59% of the subjects were female and 41% male;
- 61% of the subjects were from urban areas and 39% from rural areas;
- 49% of the subjects were high school or vocational school graduates, 25% of them had completed general school, 22% had graduated from a college or university and 4% had completed master's or doctoral studies;
- Patients' perception of nonverbal communication was assessed by analyzing: eye contact, facial expression, body language, respect for privacy, touch and consolation, listening ability and communication efficiency;
- Regarding eye contact, subjects from urban areas rated it as good, with a mean of 3.12 with a median and mode of 3, and subjects from rural areas responded similarly, the difference not being statistically significant;
- The perception of the warm and smiling face of the medical staff in the dental office by subjects from urban areas was good: mean 3.02 with a median and mode of 3, but subjects from rural areas rated it at a mean of 2.79 with a median of 2 and mode of 3, the difference being statistically significant, p=0.03;
- Regarding the soothing body language of the medical staff in the dental office, subjects from urban areas rated it as good, with a mean of 3.17 with a median and mode of 3, and subjects from rural areas rated the body language similarly, with a mean of 3.14 with a mode and median of 3, the difference not being statistically significant;
- Subjects rated the respect for body space and privacy in the dental office as good, those from urban areas with an average of 3.88 with median and mode 4, and those from rural areas with an average of 4.13 with mode and median 4, this difference being statistically insignificant;
- Regarding communication as a whole, subjects from urban areas rated it as good, with a mean of 3.39, with a median and mode of 3, and subjects from rural areas responded similarly, with a mean of 3.11, with a mode and median of 3, the difference not being statistically significant;
- Regarding the perception of the efficiency of nonverbal communication with patients by medical personnel in the dental office, subjects from urban areas rated it as good, with a mean of 3.35, with a median and mode of 3, and subjects from rural areas responded similarly, with a mean of 3.19, with a mode and median of 3, the difference not being statistically significant;
- Regarding the communication of treatment and its options, explained by the dentist, the perception of subjects from urban areas was good, with a mean of 3.15, with a median and mode of 3, and subjects from rural areas gave a mean of 2.81, with a mode and median of 3, the difference not being statistically significant;
- Regarding the ability to communicate the discomfort or sensation they may experience during treatment to the

medical staff in the dental office, subjects from urban areas rated it as almost good, with an average of 2.91 with a median and mode of 3, and subjects from rural areas rated it as almost good, with an average of 2.79, with a mode and median of 3, the difference not being statistically significant;

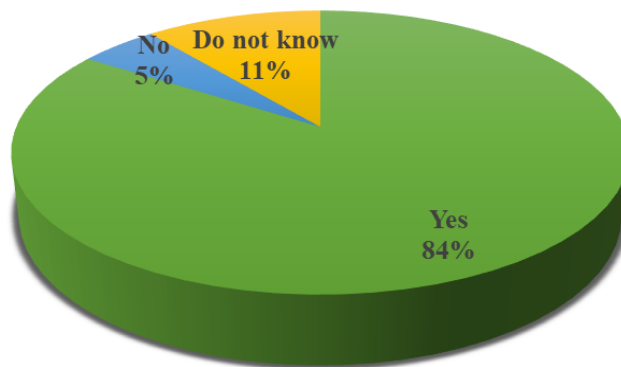
- Regarding encouraging questions and providing clear answers, the perception of patients from urban areas was almost good, with an average of 2.87 with a median and mode of 3, with subjects from rural areas responding similarly, with an average of 2.56, with a mode and median of 2, the difference not being statistically significant, p=0.071;
- 74% of respondents would recommend the previously accessed dental service to others (figure 1);

Figure 1 - Future recommendation of previously accessed dental service



- Subjects reported the following regarding the perception of the understanding of their concerns and needs by the medical staff in the dental office: subjects from urban areas rated it as good, with a mean of 3.75, with a median of 4 and a mode of 3, while subjects from rural areas responded similarly, with a mean of 3.89, with a mode of 3 and a median of 4, the difference not being statistically significant p=0.111;
- Among the patients responding to the questionnaire, 84% considered that their cultural beliefs and needs were respected during the visit to the dentist (figure 2);

Figure 2 - Perception of respect for cultural beliefs



- 67% of patients stated that they felt that their rights were respected, while 6% considered that their rights were not respected at all (figure 3);

Figure 3 - Perception regarding respect for patient rights

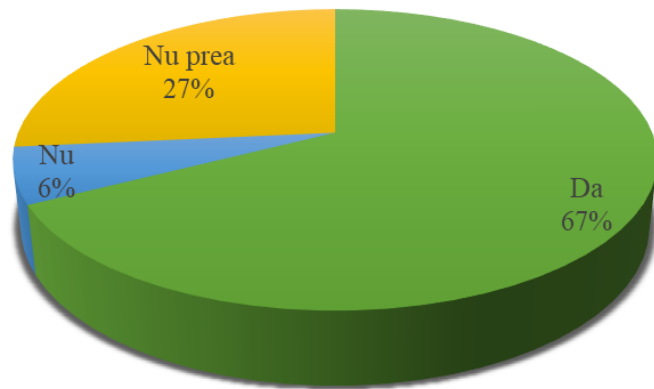
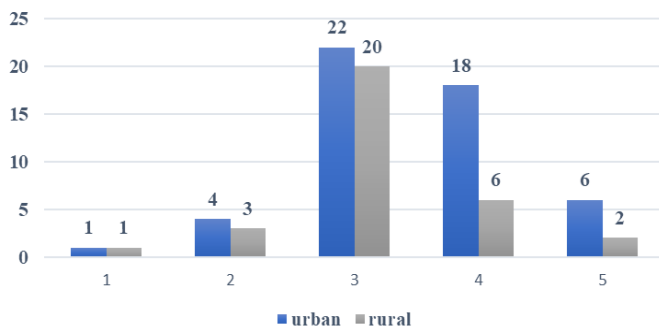


Figure 4 - Overall communication was effective and informative



- 34.58% perceived that they were treated with empathy by the dentist, while 16.54% of patients perceived the dentist as cold in their relationship with them;
- 89.15% of subjects appreciated the overall communication as efficient and informative (42 people perceived it as good, 24 people perceived it as very good and 8 people perceived it as excellent) (figure 4);

DISCUSSIONS

- NVC plays a vital role in the treatment of oral pathology, enhancing the overall patient experience and facilitating effective dental care. Components of NVC, such as maintaining eye contact, a warm smile, and body language that suggests attention to the patient, help create a sense of trust and comfort between patients and dental professionals. These components help reduce anxiety and foster a positive treatment environment [16].
- NVC also allows the dental team to recognize signs of discomfort or pain in the patient during treatment. Observing facial expressions, body stiffness, or changes in posture allows identification of when staff need to make adjustments, such as offering a break or administering additional anesthesia. Patients' nonverbal cues provide valuable feedback to dental professionals. Facial expressions, body movements, or hand gestures may indicate discomfort, sensitivity, or the need for further explanation. Attention to these cues allows dental professionals to adapt their approach and promptly address patients' concerns [17].

- NVC is essential in respecting cultural differences and patient rights. Awareness of culturally specific norms related to personal space, eye contact, and touch ensures that dental professionals provide care that is culturally sensitive and avoids any unintended discomfort. The components of NVC, eye contact, and demonstration, are valuable tools for educating patients during dental treatment. Presentation of appropriate brushing techniques, use of diagrams, and role-playing facilitate patient understanding of oral hygiene instructions and reinforce the ability to implement these instructions. NVC strengthens the therapeutic relationship between the dental team and patients. By conveying empathy, compassion, and respect through NVC, dental professionals promote a supportive and collaborative environment, inviting patient involvement to increase patient satisfaction [18].

- By creating a comfortable space for patients, where they feel comfortable and at ease, they are more likely to communicate openly, share their concerns, and cooperate with the dental staff during treatment. Simple gestures (a gentle touch on the arm or a reassuring smile) can provide some emotional support and comfort to more anxious patients, alleviate anxiety, and create a more relaxed environment.

- NVC is particularly valuable when healthcare professionals are dealing with language barriers or when patients have difficulty expressing themselves verbally. Nonverbal components such as nodding, mirroring, or using visual aids can help convey information and instructions to patients or provide reassurance. Dental staff can thus ensure that patients understand the treatment plan and are committed to actively participating in their own care.

- By carefully observing patients' nonverbal feedback, dental professionals can adjust their approach to ensure patient comfort and safety.

- NVC is also essential when treating pediatric patients or patients with special needs, who may either have limited verbal communication skills or require assistance from caregivers. It is therefore necessary to improve verbal and NVC with pediatric or special needs patients. Dental professionals can rely on elements of NVC to establish a connection with these patients, gain their trust, and communicate effectively with patients.

- When dental professionals demonstrate competence and professionalism by implementing their NVC skills, this improves patients' perceptions of their medical skills and expertise.

- In short, NVC in oral care is necessary to be mastered to build trust and is crucial for conveying empathy and improving understanding. Good management of one's own NVC skills helps the dentist manage anxiety and monitor patient nonverbal feedback, communicate with pediatric or special needs patient populations, and project professionalism. By using effective and efficient NVC techniques, dental professionals can create a supportive and comfortable treatment environment that promotes patient satisfaction and increases patient cooperation [19].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Most patients reported positive experiences with NVC from dental professionals in the office. These included maintaining eye contact, displaying a warm and encouraging facial expression, and using calm
- and reassuring body language during procedures. These findings confirm the importance of mastering NVC techniques and confirm that dental professionals should be attentive and create a supportive environment for patients, and most do so.
- Patients rated NVC from dental professionals as extremely important in making them feel comfortable, reducing their anxiety, and feeling at ease during dental visits. This result highlights the importance of NVC elements in building trust, establishing strong doctor-patient relationships, and improving the overall patient experience in the dental office.
- Patients perceived and rated NVC from dental professionals as effective and informative. They appreciated that the dentist communicated treatment options and procedures effectively and in a way that they understood, were encouraged to explain discomfort or sensations during treatment, and understood their concerns and needs. These findings are suggestive of the axiom that NVC complements verbal communication to ensure and facilitate a clear and comprehensive exchange of information.
- Patients who experienced positive and complex NVC from dental professionals reported lower levels of anxiety during their dental office visits. This finding reinforces the idea that nonverbal cues, such as calm demeanor, attentive attitude and orientation toward the patient, and reassuring body language, play a crucial role in alleviating patient anxiety and promoting a relaxed treatment environment for the patient.
- Patients also rated the dental professionals' NVC as empathetic, indicating that the nonverbal cues from the healthcare professionals effectively conveyed caring, understanding, and support. This direct association between NVC and empathy may contribute to higher levels of patient satisfaction and improved treatment outcomes.
- A significant percentage of patients expressed a willingness and willingness to recommend the dental office based on their experience with the dental professionals' NVC. This finding highlights the potential favorable impact of positive NVC on patient loyalty and practice reputation.
- In conclusion, the study demonstrates and reinforces the importance of NVC in the dental office. Positive signs of NVC from dental professionals contribute significantly to patient comfort, effective communication and patient understanding of information, reduced dental anxiety, improved patient satisfaction, and increased likelihood of patient referral. Implementing strategies to improve dental staff nonverbal skills and prioritizing NVC in patient interactions can lead to more positive experiences, better treatment outcomes, and strengthened doctor-patient relationships in the dental office.

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