



“Working As a Team to Improve Oral Hygiene”

“Neck and Heart like a Giraffe”

This summer I had the chance to visit the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, Washington. I must admit that it was one of the most incredible experiences I have ever had. At this zoo they let you feed the giraffes. After paying just \$5.00 we were able to buy food and feed the giraffes from the palm of our hand.

There are two giraffes called Chioke and Olivia who live at the zoo. Olivia is the mother and Chioke is the teenage boy. Once we paid our \$5.00, we learned all about giraffes in general, why they have long dark tongues and even the difficult personalities of the teenage male giraffe. Most importantly, we were taught how to properly hold the food in our hand to safely and properly feed each of the 2 giraffes. When the giraffes were called by name they would walk slowly to the trainer and then bend their 6+ foot neck and large heart.

Months later I still think about these fascinating mammals. The giraffes' long neck affords a long view into the distance and provides a heightened awareness of future possibilities. The giraffe not only has a long neck, but is also the one land animal with the largest heart. These parts of the giraffe can be seen as vulnerability and they can also transform into strength.

As humans we can often be seen as giraffes when we stick out of necks as we communicate, express our feelings and needs through our use of words. I ponder the consequences of our thoughts, words and actions when as humans we communicate our wants, needs and desires. Sometimes our words can cause damage to our vulnerable heart.

While learning to feed the two giraffes, I became aware of the compassionate nature necessary to be a part of their environment. I felt empathetic when I learned about the emotions, trials and tribulations a teen male giraffe experiences. The male giraffe at this zoo is named Chioke and he can become a terrible teen when he doesn't get his way. If he sees an attractive young female giraffe his hormones begin to rage out of control. Chioke feels vulnerable when in the presence of another young female giraffe.

(Please take note that Chioke is approximately 13 human years old.)

The trainer who taught us how to feed the animals would call them by name: “Chioke” and “Olivia”, he would call out to them. One by one the giraffes would come over and touch a target held out to them. Once they touched the target they were able to receive some acacia leaves from the palm of our hand.

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So what is it that began to connect me with my compassionate nature when under these circumstances? Through listening to our “animal” trainer and then his communication skills to attract each giraffe to the food in my hand; I learned that I was able to identify with a specific approach to communicating: both – speaking and listening; to give from *my* heart. This type of connection when translated into the connection with ourselves and with each other allows our natural compassion to flourish.

I have to admit I felt a bit fearful holding out my hand to such a large animal but the language and *posture* taught by the trainer at Woodland Park Zoo, gave me strength and I felt brave enough to stick out my hand to feed each of the two giraffes. This experience began to shed new light on my relationships and intention with others in this world.

As dental professionals we are assessing and diagnosing on a daily basis. After assessing and diagnosing, we must communicate this information to our patient. One must ask “How do I *appropriately* communicate these observations; these judgments about my patient?” When we learn to communicate with the vulnerability and heart of a giraffe the resistance and defensiveness felt by patients can be greatly reduced.

People come into a dental office with their own agenda, their own set of baggage and feel very vulnerable when reclined back in a dental chair. We need to communicate our examination findings as observations rather than assessments. Many times as healthcare professionals we automatically express our findings, diagnosis or observations as a *judgment* which we just made of our patient. We don’t consciously behave this way but we are trained professionals and this is how the brain naturally begins to function when analyzing anything we do on a regular basis. Many times patients don’t want us to know about their anxiety or baggage even if we have asked numerous questions verbally or on a written medical history.

Understanding vulnerability and learning about the giraffe can guide us to communicate to our patients with compassion and empathy. This can be the beginning of learning endless compassion and empathy towards a population of people who don’t necessarily enjoy being reclined in a dental chair.

Almost everyday as a dental professional we most likely come in contact with people who are nervous or anxious about being in a dental office. Many patients come in with their own agenda or are maybe just having a bad day. The dental office and the dental team members seem to be *the place* where they can or will just *let it all out*. This is where it becomes very important to take time to observe our patients behavior. It is a time when we are able to respond with concrete actions: for example compassion and empathy.

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Recently, I was coaching a dental team and none of the team members wanted to see a particular patient. I will refer to this patient as “Patient A”. This patient was seen as a new patient earlier that month. During the team meeting the one hygienist explained about a patient she no longer wished to see, not only in her operatory, but felt the patient should be referred elsewhere for “Twilight Sleep”. “Patient A” was new to the office and at the first “Hello”, appeared anti-social and broke out into a sweat from obvious anxiety. “Patient A” became very difficult when the hygienist attempted to recline him back in the chair to obtain the routine “assessments” My response to the dental team members during this conversation was to speak to “Patient A” and about “Patient A” with compassion and empathy.

Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. When empathy occurs we have successfully put aside all of our preconceived ideas and judgments about the other person. The expression of empathy is not easy to maintain. Instead of offering empathy most people give advice or reassurance and many will begin to explain their own position or feeling of the situation. As healthcare professionals we are susceptible to giving advice or trying to “fix” the situation. How can this difficult situation with “Patient A” be handled in a different way? How can we assist and guide this patient to feel less vulnerable in the dental office?

Some of the questions you may want to ask are: Why is “Patient A” reacting to the dental appointment with fear or anxiety? A good example of this would be “Can you tell me about your previous dental experiences?” This now allows us to gather information without just sensing how the patient may be feeling.

When in a situation with a difficult patient occurs such as the one described above remember how important it is to:

- Preserve their dignity and avoid humiliation

During the team meeting it was apparent that the dental hygienist was not aware of this anxiety prior to reclining the patient in the dental chair. How could this situation have been avoided?

Some thoughts to show compassionate or empathy:

- Engage in a dialogue to understand his/her point of view and determine his/her specific needs. Throughout the dialogue keep in mind:
 1. Provide assistance to meet his/her needs to the extent you are willing and able to. Keep in mind:

2. You are responsible for your choices and actions.
3. He/She is responsible for his/her choices and actions.
4. You can change some things but not other things you find are necessary

Did “Patient A” need to spend more time with a “get acquainted” appointment? Would more time spent upright vs. supine have helped the patient during their appointment? The previous trauma experienced by the patient was most likely decades ago and just a few minutes seated in the dental chair was not going to help overcome this fear. By possibly taking time to get to know the patient and offering other methods of treatment such as nitrous oxide, maybe a chance to wear headphones and watch a movie or listen to music, may provide comfort temporarily; just enough to get through the first hour in the dental office.

This behavior, this anxiety, about being in a dental office is not going to change over night but we are responsible for making appropriate and professional choices about how we treat our patients. The example of “Patient A” is just one example of how we can become more empathetic and compassionate when communicating with our patients.

Most offices have developed a code of ethics or as I call it “Practice Principles”. It is similar to the golden rule or the 10 commandments: “Treat others as you want to be treated”. Perhaps a more accurate model is given by the “platinum rule”: Treat others as they want to be treated. The principle of empathy may be sufficient to develop a complete and socially valuable code of ethics.

More quotations which explain about empathy and can model how to provide empathy towards patients in difficult dental positions:

“It is more important to define yourself by who you include than by who you exclude.” ~ From the movie Chocolat

“See yourself in others, then who can you hurt? What harm can you do?” ~ The Buddha

These are just a few tips to assist teams and dental offices in dealing with difficult situations. The end result can be a less stressful day, a happy patient, a new referral, increased profitability, etc., etc.

When you have time to visit a zoo and when you see the giraffes I believe you will understand the vulnerability they feel living each day sticking their necks out. Until then keep you neck in check and your heart as big as the giraffes!