



THE CLINICAL COMPOSITE

Clinical care news, information and tips for the UF College of Dentistry

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The art of the apology

When something goes wrong or there is a bad outcome what should you tell the patient? There is an old saying that “the truth will set you free” and when you interact with patients, this sets the foundation for handling bad outcomes.

A good apology begins with your acknowledgement of shared regret over the outcome. The apology doesn't have to be an admission of wrongdoing or negligence. It is a way to open channels of communication with your patients so they know you care. When things go wrong your patient wants and deserves information. If they feel you're not providing open, complete information, they can become frustrated and this stresses the relationship you've established.

Most legal actions against dentists begin with a lack of communication, especially when things go wrong. If patients are informed, up front, of possible problems they are usually open to understanding. Usually a bad outcome is a result of a known risk, and our hope is that we've informed our patients of all known risks associated with treatment.

Five Steps of the Artful Apology

- 1) Show your empathy for the patient without admitting liability.
- 2) Describe the problem in brief, factual terms without criticizing yourself or others.
- 3) Don't “think out loud” or try and figure out how it happened. The patient wants the truth and they don't want to feel that they have been deceived or abandoned by their dentist.
- 4) Make sure clinical notes reflect your conversation and exchange with the patient.
- 5) Maintain the avenues of communication through the apology.

EHR: A new environment

We've entered a new era of record keeping - the era of electronic health records. All medical facilities are moving in that direction; Shands is deploying Epic, their EHR software soon. This move has some very nervous about what to expect when patient issues lead to litigation. The uncertainty stems from the lack of legal and practical precedent concerning what is discoverable in the record. However, the basic tenants of record keeping don't, and shouldn't, change.



Know your patient: Review patients' medical history and current status

Check informed consent: Make sure your patients sign informed consents; not just for surgical procedures. If your treatment plan has changed, you need to inform the patient and always ensure patient records include updated treatment plans.

Notes are critical: Your notes should reflect professional “standards of care” and convey what you have done and observed. It should be clear that any oral issues were identified and presented to the patient.

Future planning: Always update information about the patient's current state and any plans you have for future care and treatment.

Privacy is paramount: ERH makes privacy violations (even unintentional ones) more possible than ever. What if you were looking up a patient named “Brad Pitt” and, by mistake, selected “Brad Pitt?” Once you realize the error, notify your supervisor so that, later, no one suspects you of snooping. The UF Privacy Office is conducting spot checks on celebrity records and people have been disciplined for just plain snooping into records they have no business viewing.

Check the record: Before entering a record make sure to verify that you are in the right record by checking the name and birth date. If you need to alter an entry after it is approved by a faculty, enter another general note and get that note authorized. Don't be afraid to add statements even if it is not in a previous note. All notes are date stamped. If you happen to make entries in the wrong chart let Clinical Administration know, and they'll make the corrections.

That couldn't happen here!

Someone's hair gets caught in a lathe and kills them? No way this could happen! But, yes way, this did happen. [This link](#) tells the recent story of a college student whose hair got caught in a lathe, causing asphyxiation and death.



I'm sure that no one at Yale thought it could happen there. The point is that we need to be diligent on all aspects of safety in our clinics, labs and classrooms. No one ever expects something like this, so please always treat safety as paramount importance.

A few points to remember:

- ▶ Keep long hair (including beards) pulled back when working on patients and equipment in the lab.
- ▶ Wear Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) is essential when working with any rotary equipment, as well as during patient care.
- ▶ Report any malfunctioning equipment as soon as it comes to your attention.
- ▶ Take some extra time evaluating your surroundings and possible safety issues.