

Communicating Science with Our Patients



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You have no doubt gathered a wealth of knowledge about scientific issues related to dental hygiene, and hopefully this journal has contributed to your knowledge. It is important that this knowledge be shared effectively with your patients. Like critically appraising scientific literature, learning how to communicate science with your patient is a skill that is learned and refined over time.

A great example of effective science communication comes from Alan Alda, an actor most commonly known for his portrayal of Captain Hawkeye Pierce in the 1970s series *M*A*S*H*. You may be surprised that Alan Alda used his incredible passion for science communication to spearhead the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University.^{1,2} During one of the Center's educational sessions, Mr Alda humorously described an acute and critical health care event that happened to him while filming in the mountains of Chile.^{2,3} After a treacherous journey to get to medical care, his talented physician described the procedure that would be required to save his life in the following manner: "Some of your intestine has gone bad, and we have to cut out the bad part and sew the two good ends together." The witty Alda responded: "You're going to do an end-to-end anastomosis." When the physician questioned how he knew this medical term, Alda responded "Oh, I did many of them on *M*A*S*H*!" This usually gets a chuckle, but also emphasizes the point of effective science communication and its important role in health care.

Communication is defined as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals."⁴ It is important to note that the definition describes an "exchange"—thus, communication is a two-way process. If the recipient does not effectively receive, understand, or use the information disseminated, then communication has not been achieved. How do we best communicate science with our patients? Well, there is not one method that will work for all, but one basic process is as follows:

- Consider what information you think the patient should know
- Consider what information is important to the patient
- Develop a strategy to bridge this gap

You'll note that this process focuses on the patient's needs and preferences. Using this strategy, you may not be able to impart all that you think is important because the focus is on what is important to the patient, but rest assured that this strategy will build trust and rapport, and over time you can strive to achieve most, if not all, of your communication goals.

I recently attended a meeting where a pediatrician shared her use of this strategy when discussing parental concerns about vaccinations. She starts each conversation with trying to understand the parent's concerns and rationale, which usually center on wanting to protect a son or daughter. She uses this to identify a common ground, both agreeing that protecting and doing what is best for the child is their shared goal. Then she proceeds to

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share customized information to address the parent's unique concerns. Using this approach, this pediatrician has vaccinated all but one child in her practice! Now that is effective communication!



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References

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This issue of the journal is dedicated in loving memory of Dennis J. Frantsve.