

The need for video imaging

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The last consultation of the day was a middle-aged man with a malocclusion characterized by crowding, deepbite, and moderately severe mandibular retrognathia. After reviewing all diagnostic records, two treatment alternatives emerged: a nonextraction approach with orthodontic camouflage through dental compensation or surgical lengthening of the mandible following the extraction of two mandibular premolars. The patient was intelligent and had already seen two other orthodontists who presented differing treatment proposals. But after a lengthy discussion including the pros and cons of each alternative, he was still undecided. Should he go for the surgical option or accept the compromise plan and its potential long-term complications?

According to Ackerman and Proffit in the lead article of this edition, (Communication in orthodontic treatment planning, 253-262) this patient's decisionmaking dilemma is one of the most difficult in contemporary orthodontics. As society changes, orthodontic treatment planning is becoming an interactive process in which the patient and the orthodontist serve as co-decision makers. Ackerman notes, "The orthodontist is generally influenced more by the objective findings, whereas patients are guided more by subjective issues related to their perceived needs, desires, and values. The art of careful probing and listening to the patient as part of the treatment planning process is an essential skill."

But is careful listening enough? After more

years than I care to remember, I have given up trying to describe these complex treatment alternatives to patients who are visualizing something totally different. New, more effective tools are needed to help make such an important decision. Sleeping on it or simply asking for the opinion of one's spouse is not enough. One such tool is computer imaging. Using a computer to simulate the probable treatment outcomes can facilitate communication about these alternatives by eliminating misconceptions.

In another article in this issue Phillips et al. studied the influence of video imaging on patients' perceptions and expectations (263-270). They found that the presentation of video images appears to be a valuable tool for conveying treatment options to patients, but caution may be needed to prevent elevated or possibly unrealistic treatment expectations. Video imaging was found to influence patients by heightening their expectations of improvement in self image following treatment.

How do I plan to make the decisionmaking process easier for my next difficult consultation patient? By making the case presentation on a computer screen...using accuracy-tested computer imaging software. In that way, the patient and I will both be looking at and discussing the same proposed changes. As Ackerman states, "In the last analysis, the moral, ethical, and legal imperative in the orthodontic decisionmaking process is that a patient's consent for treatment must be an informed one."