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# Consenting Adults

In the second article of this series on duty of care, **Dr Adam Sheridan**, dermatologist, MBBS FACD FACMS FAAFPS, explains the importance of ‘informed consent’.

In the first article of this series\* we introduced the concept of duty of care and discussed cardinal rules for all care givers: ‘First, do no harm’ and ‘Identify and properly address any health issues prior to any action’. It was emphasised that duty of care should not be viewed in negative terms, but rather as a positive reflection of one’s role. When this responsibility is met, your professional standing rises.

Special care is required in the aesthetics realm, where most patients are self-referred and not previously assessed by general medical professionals. Individuals usually present having self-diagnosed an issue as requiring treatment, self-directing themselves upon the path to cosmetic treatment, without necessarily considering alternative possibilities. The professional therapist is duty bound to question this assumption. Prior to delivering treatment it is essential to confirm the ‘diagnosis’ and appropriateness of the proposed treatment, and to consider all alternatives, including withholding treatment. The beauty professional has a duty to ensure that when a client makes a decision, they are properly informed. This applies to all forms of therapy, not just physical treatment, which brings us to a further cardinal rule for health and beauty professionals: ‘Always ensure your client has provided informed consent to treatment’.

So, what constitutes informed consent and why is it so important? Informed consent is more than a simple nod and agreement to go ahead with a treatment. It is a careful process of communication designed to ensure a patient fully understands all aspects of the proposed treatment; in particular the potential benefits, risks and available alternatives relating to the treatment. This allows the individual to make a truly informed choice about their health care. In a nut-shell, the process of obtaining informed consent is intended to ensure your patient shares your own degree of understanding of the treatment before deciding to undertake it. It is only when a patient reaches the point of shared understanding that they are in a position to make a sound decision whether to proceed.

Sounds a bit involved? Perhaps; but apart from being the right thing to do both morally and legally, the benefits of an informed consent process are several and flow both ways.

Informed consent benefits:

1. Fosters trusting relationships and mutual respect
2. Encourages realistic treatment expectations
3. Improves compliance with the treatment process
4. Increases acceptance of setbacks should they occur
5. Reduces patient complaints

Steps to obtaining informed consent:

1. Provide information in a style that is meaningful to the patient. Consider language and cultural factors; everyone is different and you will need to vary your approach for each individual.
2. Be clear about who will perform the treatment (especially if this is not you), and their qualifications.
3. Engage in a full and frank discussion about the proposed procedure, the likely benefits and possible adverse effects. Be as clear and descriptive as possible. Consider risks that may be particularly heightened for the individual before you.
4. Indicate if the treatment is new, or experimental. Consider stating the numbers of patients who have received the treatment.
5. Discuss alternatives, including the option to do nothing. Careful decisions around what not to do are just as important as those that result in action. It is impossible to take a treatment and its side-effects back, much as we will all wish we could at some stage in our careers.
6. Clearly outline all costs to the patient, both time and money.
7. Check with the individual regarding any particular potential adverse effects of special significance to that individual. Such risks are referred to as ‘material risks’ and vary from person to person. A professional pianist or surgeon is likely to be far more wary of rare risks around hand function, than other individuals.
8. Ensure your advice is unbiased and free from influences such as the clinic’s ‘bottom line’.
9. Encourage questions and allow adequate time and space for the patient to digest the discussion. Consent must always be given freely and without external pressure. A cooling off period may be helpful to ensure this.
10. Remember that consent can only be given by a legally competent adult.

A simple way to judge if the above checklist has been fulfilled is to distance yourself for a moment, and imagine learning about the treatment at hand for the first time yourself. What are the most salient points you would have wished to know prior to deciding whether to undergo the treatment? Now place yourself in the position of the patient and consider if there are any factors specific to this person that should now be raised. To cap it off, think, if my parent or child was considering this treatment, what level of knowledge and understanding would I wish them to have before making the treatment decision by themselves?

Once you have obtained informed consent, remember to document the process in written form for future reference. Let the patient know that you have documented this at the time. It may be helpful to issue a record of the consent, including what was discussed, to the patient for their own records and reference. Information sheets are also useful, especially when one considers the statistic that people remember less than 30 per cent of what they are told verbally.

Due care and attention to the above will contribute to a rewarding career engaging with informed, cooperative and happy clients. Good luck with all your future treatments! ■

*\*Professional Beauty March/April 2015, online and at sds.com.au*