Informed Consent
A Peer-Reviewed Publication
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Educational Objectives
Upon completion of this course, the clinician will be able to do the following:
1. Explain the difference between “consent” and “informed consent.”
2. Explain the importance of informed consent in today’s dental records.
3. Understand how to decide which scenarios require informed consent.
4. Explain which members of the dental team are qualified to obtain informed consent.
5. Explain the difference between “informed consent” and “informed refusal” and understand under what circumstances each should be used.
6. Understand under what conditions automated education systems can help in the informed consent process.

Abstract
Treating a patient without “consent” constitutes a battery; treating a patient without “informed consent” constitutes negligence. Dentists must respond to a wake-up call that informed consent is no casual issue. If a procedure is “invasive or irreversible,” informed consent must be obtained; if the procedure is diagnostic in nature and the patient wishes to forgo the procedure, an “informed refusal” must be obtained. Although obtaining informed consent may at first seem awkward, cumbersome, and time consuming, it may very well save a practitioner countless hours in the courtroom and thousands of dollars in legal fees.

Introduction
Long gone are the days when patients would enter a dental office, sit quietly in an operatory, and allow the dentist to perform whatever treatment he deemed necessary, and then pay the quoted fee in full on the way out… no questions asked. Today’s patients are better educated, more informed, and less trusting than patients were thirty years ago. They want to know exactly what their options are, how much it will cost, what will happen if they don’t receive the prescribed treatment, and how long they can delay expensive restorative treatment before serious repercussions occur. In addition, there is the added factor of dental insurance coverage, which is something no one had to consider prior to 1970. In today’s treatment arena, patients are often swayed by coverage benefits rather than prescribed treatment, leaving the dentist wide open to future litigation should the patient complain he or she was inadequately informed of options or repercussions, and if proper documentation of prescribed treatment cannot be found in the patient record.

Dentists, as a whole, are notorious for poor record keeping, but the idea of informed consent along with proper documentation has come full circle in the dental profession. Unlike their physician counterparts who have been acutely aware of informed consent for many years, dentists must respond to a wake-up call that informed consent is no casual issue. Although procedures such as root canal therapy and extractions seem obvious when it comes to the need for informed consent, dental practitioners often overlook or take for granted minor procedures such as fillings and local anesthesia that also require informed consent. As we look at this critical issue, keep in mind that each state has varying nuances in its laws, but the idea of informed consent is universal.

The History of Consent
The idea of consent, at least in the legal world, began as a simple defense to the tort of battery. Battery is defined as “the intentional and offensive touching of another without lawful justification.” If there is “consent,” there is permission or lawful justification for the touching and therefore no claim to battery. Tort law generally accepts the view of volenti non fit injuria, meaning, “to one who is willing, no wrong is done.” Consent, however, can occur in many forms. For example, the simple extension of the right hand to initiate a handshake is a nonverbal form of consent allowing the second party to grasp the hand of the first in a reasonably firm manner. It is not, on the other hand, consent for the second party to squeeze the hand of the first until his bones are crushed. In addition, an affirmative answer to the question, “May I borrow your car?” gives verbal consent to the normal use of a car but does not grant the borrower the privilege to jump curbs at will causing damage to the vehicle. Thus, common sense dictates that consent based on a misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the facts does not constitute true consent. (This idea will become more important when we discuss “informed” consent.)

Most courts hold that a defendant is privileged to make contact where the plaintiff’s words, gestures, or conduct reasonably manifest consent to it, even if the plaintiff was not actually willing to be touched. To illustrate this idea of implied consent, one can look to O’Brien v. Cunard SS Co., a famous case from 1891. Ms. O’Brien, the plaintiff, was aboard the defendants’ ship on her way to the United States. It was customary at that time for all immigrants that had not previously been vaccinated for smallpox to receive a smallpox vaccination on board prior to reaching the US shore. Although the plaintiff testified that she was unwilling to be vaccinated, she stood in line with over 200 other women, witnessing many of them receiving immunizations. When it was her turn to be vaccinated, she voluntarily held up her arm to receive the shot. It was later determined by the courts that the doctor was justified in giving her the vaccine, despite what her unexpressed feelings may have been.

Some fourteen years later, however, there was evidence of a change and of things to come. In 1905, Mohr v. Williams gave us an example of how consent may allow one type of touching but not another. The physician in this case obtained consent from the patient to operate on her diseased right ear, but once in the operating room the physician found her left ear in worse condition. The surgeon proceeded to operate on...
the left ear instead, and although the surgery was done well, the physician’s treatment went beyond the scope of contact to which the patient had consented and was thus held to be battery by the courts.5

During the last quarter-century, advances in medical and dental treatments have given rise to a host of difficult consent issues now analyzed under the rubric of the “right to refuse treatment.” Most courts now recognize the right of a competent adult to refuse treatment, even life-saving treatment (do not resuscitate orders), based on common-law battery principles and the constitutional right of privacy or liberty.6

As caregivers, we often fail to understand why anyone would refuse treatment that would improve his or her overall health, but the courts have shown that society places a higher fundamental value on personal autonomy.

The Importance of “Informed” Consent
By now, the idea of consent should be fairly clear. Consent must be obtained before any unwanted touching occurs, otherwise a battery has been committed. But what about “informed” consent? Exactly what is the difference between “consent” and “informed consent?” “Informed consent” is defined as, “a person’s agreement to allow something to happen, made with full knowledge of the risks involved and the alternatives” or “a patient’s knowing choice about a medical [dental] treatment or procedure, made after a physician [dentist] or other health care provider discloses whatever information a reasonably prudent provider in the medical community would give to a patient regarding the risks involved in the proposed treatment or procedure.” In short, informed consent is consent given by the patient based on additional information provided by the health care provider.

In the eyes of the law, dentists are experts in their chosen field and therefore bear a duty to their patients to share their knowledge, to the extent that a reasonable patient in the same circumstances would want to be educated, about his or her condition and the treatments or procedures available. That does not mean that a practitioner must engage in an explanation equal to the depth of three hours of dental continuing education.

It does mean, however, that a dentist must inform, in layman’s terms, the condition or disease present and the treatments available to the patient, whether or not the practitioner performs all of the treatments discussed. For example, a general dentist must discuss the option of implants as well as bridges, flippers, and partial dentures, even if that dentist does not place or restore implants, if he plans to remove a tooth or two on the lower right quadrant. The patient must understand not only the importance of replacing the extracted teeth but all of the available options to do so as well.

In addition, the practitioner must keep in mind that the patient’s preconceived notions surrounding certain procedures in dentistry often block clear, rational decision-making capabilities unless the doctor offers conscientious, thorough information upon which the patient can base the consent. For instance, a patient seeks treatment for a toothache in which a carious exposure on a lower left first molar is present. The dentist’s diagnosis/treatment plan calls for root canal therapy followed by full coronal restoration with a crown. The patient, having heard rumors for years that root canals are painful and simply do not work, immediately informs the doctor that she does not wish to have root canal therapy. The doctor, not wanting to go against the wishes of the patient, gladly agrees to extract the tooth, and in fact does so after obtaining a signed, written consent for the extraction. The dentist in this scenario, however, failed to inform the patient that the molar in question was the last periodontally stable tooth in the quadrant, leaving the existing lower removable partial denture with no anchor- ing abutment on the left side after the extraction. After returning home, the patient places the lower partial back into position and realizes that it is no longer stable when she speaks and chews. Not happy with the first dentist, the patient seeks the advice of a second dentist who tells her she is destined for a lower denture or implants or some combination of both. The patient’s response is simply, “Had I known that I was going to lose my partial, I would have most likely gone ahead and done the root canal to save the tooth.”

As the above example shows, most treatments involve consequences far beyond the understanding of most patients. After all, the patient is not the expert and must rely upon the dentist for information as to what may happen to him or her in the future. Although the patient signed an informed consent regarding the risks and dangers involving the extraction itself, no “informed” consent was given for the “treatment” since the first dentist failed to give the patient adequate information to make a rational decision overall. As is often the case in the dental office, patients arrive in pain and simply want the pain to stop no matter what the consequences. In such cases, it is best to alleviate the pain with local anesthetic to allow a less clouded judgment and normal thought process to emerge. In the eyes of the law, a person cannot consent to anything if his or her judgment is impaired in any way. This was often meant to include drugs and alcohol, which remove the ability to make sound decisions, yet pain should also be included in this category since it too often impairs the ability to think in a rational manner.

Informed consent protects not only the patient but the doctor as well. It is simply a signed document acknowledging that the patient understands all of the ramifications surrounding a certain condition and treatment options available. In some cases, informed consent may be in the
form of an “informed refusal.” For example, a patient who has been diagnosed with advanced periodontal disease may elect to have no treatment at all and allow nature to take its course resulting in the slow loss of his or her remaining dentition. Patients have the ultimate say when it comes to treatment, but it is the practitioner’s duty to make sure all options for treatment are explored. In this case, a signed refusal protects the doctor by documenting the conditions found and the treatment options presented.

What Dental Treatments Require An Informed Consent?

As the need for informed consent becomes more evident to the dental profession, the common question arises as to which procedures actually require written, informed consent. The answer to that question is relatively straightforward: Any procedure that is “invasive or irreversible” requires informed consent. The fact that a patient goes to an office for an exam implies that he or she wants the doctor to perform some type of clinical exam to determine what might be needed, but most dentists take for granted the fact that more than 90 percent of their procedures are surgical in nature. All procedures, from a simple buccal pit restoration to the removal of a complicated, full bone, impacted third molar, require an irreversible change to bodily tissues with the risk of some type of complication or unwanted side effect. Even minor occlusal/incisal adjustments can affect the surrounding dentition, cuspid rise, masticatory function, or TMJ stability. The mouth is an extremely dynamic environment, subject to the forces of the tongue, lips, cheeks, and teeth. Any change to that environment, even with the best of intentions by the practitioner, may lead to unwanted results, and those possibilities need to be presented to the patient and documented in writing.

Although “invasive and irreversible” procedures require informed consent, most diagnostic procedures such as clinical exams, periodontal probings, and radiographs do not require such formal consent. It is assumed, for the most part, that patients want the doctor to obtain all of the information necessary to make a complete and accurate assessment of the oral condition when scheduling for an initial exam, cleaning, or toothache exam. On occasion, however, patients will specifically state that they wish to forgo diagnostic procedures such as radiographs or periodontal probings. The practitioner’s focus must immediately turn to “informed refusal” in these cases. To substantiate this, one must look no further than Truman v. Thomas in which a physician was found liable for failing to warn a patient of the risk of refusing a Pap smear test. Patients must be informed, in writing, that refusing radiographs may lead to undetected decay, abscesses, or bone loss, and that refusing periodontal probings will prevent an accurate assessment of periodontal health which may lead to eventual shifting of the dentition or complete tooth loss. Patients, especially those that are pain-free, often fail to understand the need for certain diagnostic procedures, but once informed of their importance either submit to the procedure or gladly sign an “informed refusal.” In either instance, it is a win-win situation for both patient and practitioner; if the patient submits to the diagnostic procedure, then an accurate diagnosis can be made, but if the patient refuses the diagnostic procedure, there is written documentation proving that the need was discussed between doctor and patient.

In summary, the following general rule should be followed: If the procedure is “invasive or irreversible,” informed consent must be obtained, but if the procedure is diagnostic in nature and the patient wishes to forgo the procedure, an “informed refusal” must be obtained.

What Information Is Needed For Informed Consent?

It is NOT sufficient that a dentist simply document in the chart that he or she “went over all risks of treatment and the patient understands.” Specific risks must be written down, and patients must be given the opportunity to discuss with the doctor and question those issues which they do not understand. It is highly recommended that the practitioner have a written informed consent form for each procedure that is performed in his or her office.

Although there is no mandatory set format for how an “informed consent” should be written, there are several key points that should be included. First, a description of the procedure to be performed should be listed. This does not have to be long, but it should be accurate and specific. For example, a listing of “lower right composite” would be too general. Instead, it would be best to label it as “MO composite tooth #30,” so that not only the specific tooth but also the surfaces involved are listed. Second, a list of the inherent risks involved in the procedure should be listed. This list does not have to be exhaustive but should cover those risks that are realistic to the procedure. For example, death is an extremely rare risk resulting from a composite. (Hopefully, the risk of death was covered on the “anesthesia consent” obtained prior to the “composite consent.”) However, the risks of a mechanical pulpal exposure, lacerated tongue or cheek, or postoperative sensitivity are realistic and should be included on the consent form. Obviously, the more risks that are listed, the more protected the practitioner will be should a problem arise. Be sure that if the list uses scientific terminology that there is a layman’s explanation beside it. After all, patients must understand what they are consenting to,
When it comes to obtaining informed consent, it is important to address the inherent risks of the procedure and its potential complications. This includes risks that are specific to the procedure as well as general risks associated with any medical intervention.

The written consent form should clearly outline these risks and be signed by both the patient and the practitioner. The signed consent form serves as documentation that the patient was fully informed and understands the risks associated with the procedure.

Conclusion

Overall, obtaining informed consent is a crucial aspect of patient care. It ensures that patients are fully informed about the potential risks and benefits of a procedure, allowing them to make informed decisions about their care. With the increasing emphasis on patient education and engagement, obtaining informed consent is not only a legal requirement but also a way to build trust and foster a patient-centered approach to healthcare.
cussions such as these rarely occur in the dental setting. However, in dentistry, just as in medicine, unforeseen mishaps occur despite our best efforts. Therefore, it is just as important for dentists to obtain informed consent prior to every invasive and/or irreversible procedure. At first glance, most patients appear friendly and most dental procedures appear routine, but once a procedure goes wrong, an unhappy patient with a skillful attorney can become a dentist’s worst nightmare. A signed, written informed consent may be the only evidence that the mishap that occurred was a foreseeable risk acknowledged by the dentist and accepted by the patient.

In short, a rule-of-thumb in dentistry is if the procedure is invasive or irreversible, it requires “informed consent.” If the procedure is diagnostic in nature (i.e. radiographs or probings), and the patient refuses the test, then an “informed refusal” must be obtained from the patient. Treating a patient without “consent” constitutes a battery, but treating a patient without “informed consent” constitutes negligence. Although obtaining informed consent may at first seem awkward, cumbersome, and time-consuming, it may very well save a practitioner countless hours in the courtroom and thousands of dollars in legal fees should some mishap occur.

References
3. Restatement (Second) of Torts §892 (2).
5. Mohr v. Williams, 104 N.W. 12 (Minn. 1905), overturned on other grounds by Genzel v. Halvorson, 80 N.W. 2d 854 (Minn. 1957).

Author Profile
Dr. Jay Baxley

Dr. Baxley obtained his undergraduate degree from Baylor University in 1982 and his DDS degree from Baylor College of Dentistry in Dallas in 1986. He has since owned and managed large, multi-chaired offices in Austin, TX, and the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. He currently operates a high-tech, eight–chair, solo office in Arlington, TX. Dr. Baxley is currently the Texas Dental Association Chairman for the Council on Ethics and Judicial Affairs and has studied law at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in Ft. Worth.

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The idea of implied consent was made by society. Patients are often swayed by the idea of consent must be defined to obtain informed consent. The idea of “informed refusal” was brought forth by Roe v. Wade and Roe v. Williams. Informed consent should be obtained when a procedure is expensive, the patient appears nervous, the procedure is irreversible, and the patient refuses a diagnostic procedure. It is sufficient that a dentist simply document in the chart that he or she “went over all risks of treatment and the patient understands.” A written “informed consent” should contain a description of the procedure to be performed, a list of the inherent risks involved in the procedure, a place for patient’s, doctor’s, and witness’s signature. A written informed consent protects the doctor, the patient, and the malpractice carrier. Over 50% of the procedures in dentistry are surgical. Failing to obtain informed consent constitutes negligence. A patient’s preconceived notions surrounding certain procedures in dentistry have nothing to do with his or her clear, rational decision-making capabilities. Today’s patients are less trusting than patients thirty years ago. Before obtaining an informed consent, the risks must be explained by a face-to-face conversation between dentist and patient.
Informed Consent

Educational Objectives
1. Explain the difference between “consent” and “informed consent.”
2. Explain the importance of informed consent in today’s dental records.
3. Understand how to decide which scenarios require informed consent.
4. Explain which members of the dental team are qualified to obtain informed consent.
5. Explain the difference between “informed consent” and “informed refusal” and understand when each should be used.
6. Understand under what conditions automated education systems can help in the informed consent process.

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Please evaluate this course by responding to the following statements, using a scale of Excellent = 5 to Poor = 0.

1. Were the individual course objectives met?  
   Objective #1: Yes No  
   Objective #2: Yes No  
   Objective #3: Yes No  
   Objective #4: Yes No  
   Objective #5: Yes No  
   Objective #6: Yes No

2. To what extent were the course objectives accomplished overall?  
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4. How would you rate the objectives and educational methods?  
   5 4 3 2 1 0

5. How do you rate the author's grasp of the topic?  
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   5 4 3 2 1 0

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