

SPOTLIGHT HEALTHCARE 06 | 2015

Data, analysis, perspectives

Evaluation of dentists

High level of overall satisfaction – but room for improvement in matters of cost transparency and communication

- **High level of overall satisfaction:**
On the whole, patients are highly satisfied with their dentists
- **No bottlenecks in care:**
As a rule, patients do not have to wait more than a week for an appointment; waiting time in the dental practice is usually less than 30 minutes
- **Lack of discretion:**
Only just over half of patients are completely satisfied with having financial matters dealt with at the reception desk
- **Not enough face-to-face communication:**
In many cases, the consultation with the dentist does not take place until the patient is already in the chair. Patients would like more explanations during treatment
- **Cost transparency and sales pressure:**
Explanations about additional costs are often found to be incomprehensible; treatment plans and cost estimates are not always reliable. Nearly one patient in six feels they have been pressured into accepting extra services which they have to pay for themselves
- **Fear and pain:**
Most dentists show sensitivity when dealing with matters of pain, but their staff do not always do enough to allay patients' fear

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In matters of dental care, Germany rates among the leaders in international comparisons. Children and adolescents have much healthier teeth nowadays than in the past. There are prophylactic and preventative programs for all age groups, and since the early 1990s these have increasingly been paid for or supplemented by the state health insurers. Caries, previously considered a national disease, has declined considerably. Thirty years ago, twelve year olds had on average seven teeth with caries; today this number is less than one, according to the German Federal Association of Sick Fund Dentists (KZBV) (KZBV Annual Report 2014, Cologne). An annual dental check-up seems to have become a fixed component of dental care in all age groups. In 2012 the number of statutory health insurance members who saw a dentist at least once a year amounted to 70.4 percent.

The new treatment concepts have also led to a considerable improvement in the oral health of the population in general. But how good is dental care really? How do patients perceive the care they receive? How do they rate their dentist? How long must people wait for an appointment and how long must they wait once they arrive at the dental practice? How well do dentists inform their patients about treatment alternatives and extra costs; how do they deal with the pain and fears of their patients? And not least of all, how good are the dental staff and the organisation in the dental practice, and when do patients recommend their dentist to others?

The Bertelsmann Stiftung has analysed how satisfied patients are with their dentist and their dental treatment. The study is based on 10,087 online evaluations on the physician rating site »Weisse Liste«. The evaluations were submitted voluntarily and anonymously by 9,259 patients insured by the AOK, BARMER GEK, Techniker Krankenkasse and Bertelsmann BKK health insurance funds and whose last visit to the dentist was not more than one year before the date of their evaluation. The evaluations related to 7,817 dentists.

It is not possible to determine on the basis of the voluntary and anonymous online evaluations to what extent the results are representative of the members of the participating health insurers or for SHI members in general. Nevertheless, the results of the »Weisse Liste« survey allow interesting observations to be made about the state of care and provide many points of reference and indicate how, from the patients' point of view, improvements in dental care can and should be made.

High general level of satisfaction

On the whole, patients are quite satisfied with dentists and dental practices in Germany: 77.9 percent would definitely recommend their dentist to their best friend. Even more patients – 83.2 percent – declare that their dentist makes a very good or excellent overall impression. Just as many praise the good work – the »high quality of treatment outcomes« – of their dentist. Only rarely do these patients have cause to change their dentist: 82.5 percent intend to remain loyal.

In respect of the way matters are handled at reception, 82.6 percent of patients are »completely satisfied«. The dental practice staff immediately make them feel welcome. A slightly smaller number – 77.5 percent of those who participated in the online evaluation – say the same in response to the question about the confidential handling of their personal documentation by the practice staff. Both values increase to over 96 percent if the »more satisfied than not« patients are also included.

No bottleneck in care – waiting times are short

The results of the data analysis show that there are no bottlenecks in dental out-patient care. For instance, 69.7 percent of patients said that they normally had to wait no longer than a week for an appointment with their dentist. In the event of acute pain or in an emergency, 78.5 percent of participants in the online evaluation were treated the same day or on the following day. This is roughly

Physician rating sites

At the end of 2009, the Agency for Quality in Medicine (ÄZQ) published a catalogue of requirements for good physician rating sites. In 2011, this check list was refined for use with dental portals by the German Dental Association (BZÄK) and the German Federal Association of Sick Fund Dentists (KZBV) and comprises 42 criteria. The ÄZQ has evaluated twelve German portals on the basis of this catalogue.

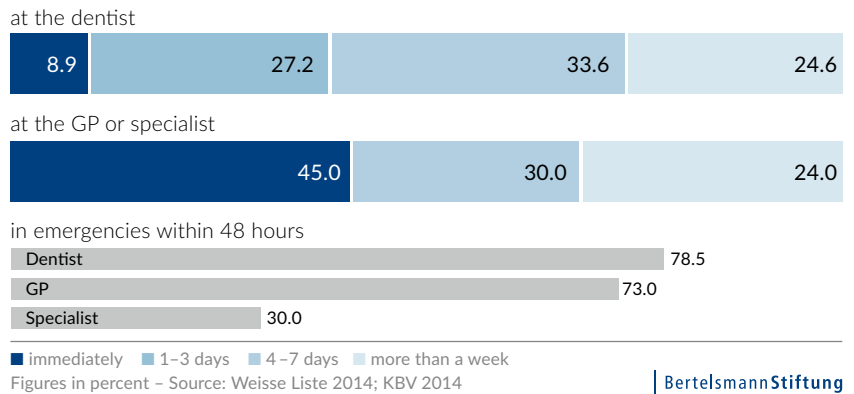
The results show that in some aspects there are considerable differences in the quality of the portals, even though some of those on offer already fulfil many of the required quality standards from a medical point of view. The »Weisse Liste« fulfils 85.4 percent of the criteria set out by ÄZQ – and thereby achieved better results than all other portals. The portal is completely free of advertising, paid entries by doctors are not possible and a registration system safeguards against manipulation. In addition – unlike the other portals – a practitioner must receive at least five evaluations in order for the results to be visible.

More information
www.arztbewertungsportale.de

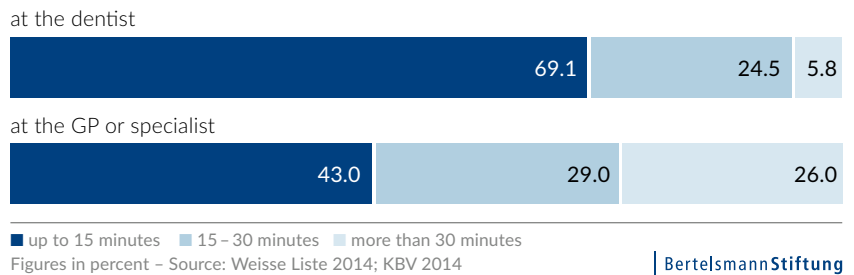
the same as the waiting times for an appointment at a general practitioner or medical specialist (see the graph on the right), as determined last year by a representative telephone survey of 6,000 members of the National Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (KBV). In the case of general practitioners and medical specialists, however, many more patients (45 %) are treated on the same day than is the case with dentists (8.9 %).

Extremely long waiting times of more than three weeks are twice as frequent with general practitioners and medical specialists (12 %) than with dentists, where only 6.1 percent of patients have to wait more than a month for an appointment. Regardless of the considerable differences between waiting times for general practitioners and medical specialists – with general practitioners, waiting times of more than three days are rather

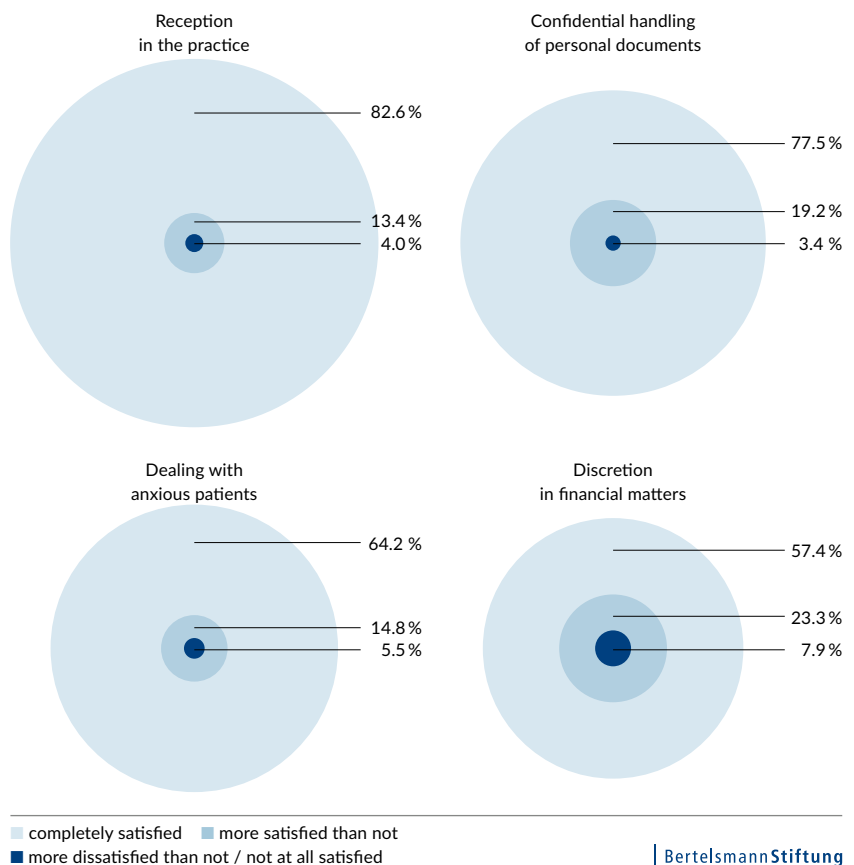
Waiting time for an appointment



Waiting time in the practice



How patients rate



Willingness to recommend and likelihood of coming back

Would you recommend this dentist to your best friend?



Would you return to this dentist for treatment in future?



■ definitely ■ probably ■ maybe ■ probably not ■ definitely not
Figures in percent

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Reference

The results of all 40 questions can be found in the real data analysis, »Patient satisfaction with dental care«. The data is based on 10,087 online evaluations of 7,817 dentists by 9,259 SHI patients.

Download available on www.weisse-liste.de/presse

The Weisse Liste questionnaire

The questionnaire, »Weisse Liste - dental care« contains 40 questions on the four topics of »Practice and staff« (13 questions), »Dentist/patient communication« (12), »Treatment« (11) and »Overall impression« (4). Patients can access the »Weisse Liste« directly or via the portals of the participating health insurance funds. These are currently the AOK, BARMER GEK, Techniker Krankenkasse and Bertelsmann BKK health insurance funds. Only members of these health insurance funds can submit evaluations and must legitimise themselves by means of their insurance number. The evaluation is then carried out anonymously.

The »Weisse Liste« questionnaire is the first German-language patient satisfaction survey instrument on dental care to be developed through an in-depth study of patient experiences and not adapted from other medical disciplines. It was developed according to the most stringent scientific standards and its validity was tested in practice on over 1,000 patients. In addition to the scientific experts, patients' representatives, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, health insurance funds and physicians' representatives were involved in its development. The »Weisse Liste« Internet portal is a joint project of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the umbrella organisations of the six largest patients' and consumer associations in Germany. The partners for the evaluation of physicians are the health insurance funds referred to above.

the exception, with medical specialists on the other hand, this is the rule – immediate treatment at a dentist's seems to be somewhat less common. On request, however, dentists seem to have the capacity to make appointments at short notice.

On the other hand, waiting times in the practice are much shorter with dentists than with general practitioners and medical specialists. Seven out of ten patients (69.1 %) are treated by their dentist within 15 minutes; overall, nine out of ten patients (93.6 %) spend less than 30 minutes in the waiting room – although 6.7 percent of dental patients stated that they then had to wait in the treatment room. During consulting hours at the general practitioner or medical specialist, only 43 percent of patients are called within a quarter of an hour. Nearly one patient in three (29 %) waits up to half an hour, and one in four (26 %) spends even more than half an hour in the waiting room.

Lack of discretion at reception

The best marks were achieved in matters of »practice and staff«: Individual aspects, such as reception, premises and organisation received better satisfaction ratings than aspects in the service areas of »dentist communication« and »treatment«, which, however, also received good ratings. The aspects with which patients expressed particular satisfaction are mainly in the area of structural and process quality – and this applies from the very beginning of their visit to the dental practice. The practice team does less well when it comes to dealing with anxious patients. In matters of dentist/patient communication and cost transparency, the online evaluations are also less positive. This also includes a frequently experienced lack of discretion, especially with regard to financial arrangements. Here, there would still seem to be room for improvement – despite the high level of satisfaction with the overall impression made by dentist, practice and treatment outcome. Only 57.4 percent

of patients are completely satisfied with the discretion with which the practice team deal with financial aspects. With this question, 23.3 percent ticked the box »more satisfied than not«. The percentage of patients who did not answer this question is relatively high (11.4 %) – perhaps because they did not have any treatment which required a co-payment. The same applies to the question whether the practice staff allay the fears of anxious patients. Only 64.2 percent of respondents in the online evaluation answer in the affirmative, while 15.5 percent evidently have no relevant experience and can not comment on this aspect.

Not enough face-to-face communication

An appointment with the dentist is a critical matter for many people and often a less than pleasant experience. For example, dental restorations often require a considerable co-payment. Since the beginning of 2005, the health insurers have applied a system of fixed payments. In the case of implants, special filling materials or new methods of treatment, which appear on the market in quick succession, matters can quickly turn out to be expensive. The dentist is obliged to set out the fixed amount allowed in a treatment plan and cost estimate before carrying out any restorative treatment. Consequently, patients can or must make a number of decisions about their treatment, either on their

own or together with their dentist. This demands trust. A decisive factor here is good communication. But from the patients' point of view, this is often lacking. Dentist/patient communication received the lowest rating in the online evaluations by health insurance members.

This applied in particular to one specific detail of the consultation prior to treatment: One patient in three can not voice their concerns until they are already sitting or lying in the treatment chair. With many dentists, patients are evidently not able to speak to their dentist on the same level, in both a physical and metaphorical sense. This presumably also makes shared decisions a difficult matter. Only 41.5 percent – in other words, less than half of consultations – take place when the patient is seated and are therefore genuinely face to face with their dentist.

Whether the first consultation should take place directly at the chairside or rather elsewhere has

Seating position during treatment consultation

Before treatment, I discuss my concerns face to face with the dentist whilst I am seated, and not just when I am already lying in the treatment chair.



■ applies in full ■ applies in part ■ does not really apply
■ does not apply at all – Figures in percent

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»There are still dentists who like to ›discuss‹ the treatment with their patients whilst the patients are sitting in the treatment chair: with a napkin round their neck, mouth agape and eyes wide open in fear.«

Ruth Auschra, journalist, in: »Plaudern als Schlüsselkompetenz« [»Chatting as a key competence«], Der junge Zahnarzt 3/2013

69.7%

of patients say that their dentist involves them in decisions about examinations and treatment

not yet been scientifically determined. The widespread opinion is that a separate place would have the advantage of compensating more for the lack of symmetry in the roles of dentist (as an expert) and patient (as a layperson). If the consultation takes place at the chairside, the patient should be seated upright and the dentist should not wear a face mask.

Apart from the matter of seating, patients are on the whole satisfied with the consultation: in the online evaluation, 80.3 percent affirm that their dentist calmly asks what is troubling them. A similar number say that the dentist is a good listener (76 %) and responds sensitively to their questions, concerns and fears (74.4 %). And as many as 83 percent of patients perceive the attitude of their dentist as distinctly pleasant and friendly, a further 11.3 percent as »more pleasant than not« and only 5.7 percent express a contrary opinion.

Knowing what the dentist is doing

The dentists received very good ratings for the actual treatment. In the portal, eleven questions were asked on this subject, whereby the dentists received high satisfaction ratings of, for example, 78.7 percent for their efforts to carry out painless treatment as far as possible and 80.1 percent for the thoroughness of the examination. It is a sign of the high degree of technical competence of the dentists that 83.2 percent of patients rated the outcome of the treatment as »very good« or »excellent«. The only problem during treatment was once again in the area of communication: many patients would like to be better informed about what the dentist is doing at any given time and why. The »Weisse Liste« online evaluation shows that every stage of the treatment is only explained to just over half of patients (58 %). One of the explanations offered for this in the literature is that the treatment is too routine a matter for the dentist to notice when it is relevant to explain the individual stages of the treatment to the patient – which would in many cases help to allay fears.



The dentist has a pleasant and friendly manner.

Before treatment, I discuss my concerns face to face with the dentist whilst I am seated, and not just when I am already lying in the treatment chair.

The practice team make me feel welcome.

The reception desk deals discreetly with financial matters (e.g. co-payments)

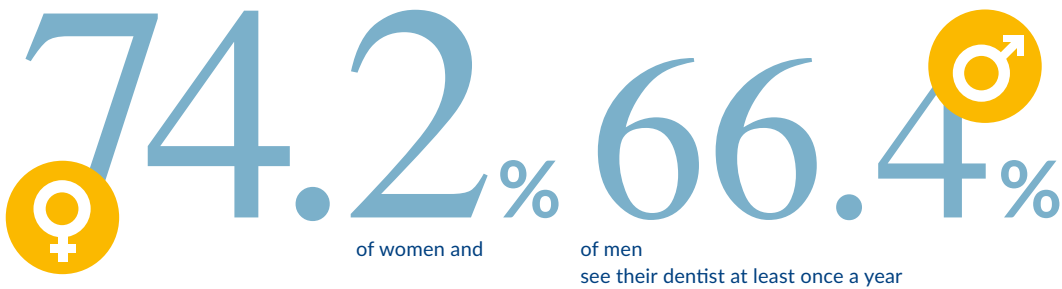
The dentist examines me thoroughly.

The dentist explains the treatment every step of the way.

Costs often unclear – patients feel sales pressure

A further problem of communication seems to be the lack of transparency about the costs incurred. In any case, patients are not always satisfied with this aspect and frequently perceive explanations of the financial consequences of various types of treatment as incomprehensible and lacking objectivity. Furthermore, patients sometimes consider the treatment plan and cost estimate for dental restorations to be unreliable. In any case, the answers to the questions about cost transparency and reliability of information (price guarantee) indicate a much lower rating than that received by

Note: The questions shown are the three with the best results and the three with the worst results in the answer category with the most or least level of agreement.



the quality of the treatment. Only 62.2 percent of patients say that their dentist explained the costs that the patients would have to pay for a proposed course of treatment in a clear and objective manner. Nearly one out of every six patients (15.3 %) – a considerable number, therefore – felt themselves to be under sales pressure in the dental practice and pressured into accepting additional treatment options which are not covered by the health insurance. This tendency might increase in future: according to information from the KZBV, dentists' turnover from co-payment treatments rose by 5.4 percent in 2012 and a trend analysis conducted by the Institute of German Dentists (IDZ) shows that the number of patients choosing co-payment options is set to rise to as much as 40 percent by 2030.

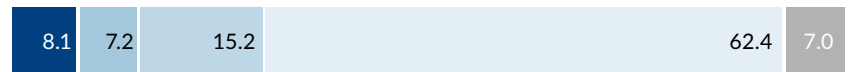
What really matters to patients

The analysis of the online evaluations also extended to studying which aspects were decisive for the overall evaluation, i.e. the willingness to recommend. The correlation analysis shows that these are mainly in the area of communication: If the patient has the impression that the dentist is doing everything in order to enable the patient to keep his or her teeth rather than replace them straight away, explains benefits and risks of examinations and various treatment options and responds sensitively to questions, concerns and fears, then the overall evaluation is correspondingly high.

In the case of the willingness to recommend, the most important aspect is how the dentist communicates diagnoses and treatment alternatives, involves patients in the decision-making process and addresses them. Overall patient satisfaction is also strongly influenced by aspects directly related to the treatment. This includes not only the time spent in consultation, but also the matter of »thoroughness«.

Perceived sales pressure

In the dental practice, I sometimes feel myself under pressure to accept services which my health insurance fund does not reimburse and which I must pay for myself.



■ applies in full ■ applies in part ■ does not really apply
 ■ does not apply at all ■ I am unable to judge – Figures in percent

| BertelsmannStiftung

»Future-oriented dental care can only be guaranteed and advanced through an ongoing process of observing and analysing current practices in care.«

Dr. Wolfgang Esser, Chairman of the National Association of Health Insurance Dentists (KZBV) in the KZBV Annual Report 2014

Aspects which, according to the correlation analysis, have virtually no effect on the overall evaluation of a dentist are the time spent waiting for an appointment or in the dental practice, the aesthetic appeal of the practice premises and the presence of modern equipment. And yet it is specifically these aspects of organisation and these features of structural quality which receive the best ratings in the patients' individual evaluations. The crucial aspects are dentist/patient communication and professional dental treatment.

Recommendations for action

Patient satisfaction with dental care in Germany is very high. Appointments can be made at relatively short notice. There are no discernible bottlenecks. The »Weisse Liste« dentist evaluations show once again that fears that predominantly dissatisfied patients express themselves on rating sites are unjustified. However, the online evaluations show where there is room for improvement: above all in communication with the patients – this is crucial to the overall rating given to a dentist. The results show how patients perceive the quality of dental care – an important indicator when setting the course in policy and practice.

Improve cost transparency

- Information about treatment plans, cost estimates and about co-payments must be transparent and comprehensible to patients.
- The dentists' obligation to provide information must be extended, e.g. by supplementing the quality assurance guidelines or minimum requirements for standardised billing.
- The right of health insurance funds to scrutinise bills issued by dentists for co-payments should be strengthened.

Communicate face to face

- Reliable and comprehensible information about treatment alternatives, risks and costs enable patients to take part in decisions relating the type of treatment without suffering from sales pressure.
- Ideally, a consultation should take place in a context which inspires trust. A place specifically designed for the purpose can make a considerable contribution to counteracting the lack of symmetry between the roles of dentist and patient.
- If the consultation takes place at the chairside, the patient should be seated upright and the dentist should not be wearing protective clothing nor a face mask.

Pay sufficient attention to the fears of anxious patients

- At the reception desk, it is important to give patients a feeling of calm and security. Waiting times in the treatment room should be avoided.
- Many patients would like more explanations about the individual phases of treatment. This can help to allay fears.
- In addition, the practice team should be specially trained to deal with anxious patients.

Maintain discretion at the reception desk

- Financial matters demand discretion. Patients do not want to discuss everything at the reception desk. A separate room is more suitable for this purpose.

Project Partners for the physician rating site on which these findings are based:



BARMER GEK



• weisse Liste

SPOTLIGHT HEALTHCARE is an impulse paper drawn up under the program »Improving Healthcare – Informing Patients« of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. It is published several times a year at irregular intervals and deals with the latest topics and challenges in the healthcare system. The Bertelsmann Stiftung is committed to promoting a healthcare system that is based on the needs of the population. Through its projects, it aims to ensure the provision of consistently needs-related and high-quality healthcare organized on a sound financial basis. Patients should be supported in their role through understandable and objective information.

»Weisse Liste« makes quality differences in health care transparent – via the Internet portal www.weisse-liste.de. The objective is to help patients and their relatives in their search for a suitable physician or hospital and to help them select the right care or treatment options. This encourages competition amongst providers and improves quality, from which patients also benefit.

Further Information at www.weisse-liste.de and www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en

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