

# A gentle dental nudge

Can you influence the behaviour of your patients simply through the power of positive reinforcement and suggestion? Anthony Asquith looks at this emerging phenomenon

In a trial using doctors and dentists with outstanding tax liabilities, they were told that their failure to pay in the past would be viewed as an oversight but, if they failed to respond in the future, it would be seen as a conscious decision. The communication from Revenue and Customs also warned that third-party evidence could be used, proving they were defrauding the Exchequer. This prompted a 14% higher response rate and resulted in £1 million in voluntary disclosures. This isn't a Derren Brown moment; this emerging phenomenon is entirely refined, subtle and is fast becoming mainstream.

## Who is using nudge?

The UK government has set up the behavioural insight team or, what is better known as the 'Nudge Unit', in London Whitehall. During the last 18 months, it has worked with several government bodies including Revenue and Customs and the techniques employed – with little or no extra cost – has resulted in the Exchequer predicting an extra £160 million in taxation, because they told 140,000 taxpayers over a six-week trial that 'nine out of 10 people in Britain paid their tax on time'.

## Mirror, mirror

The BBC *One Show* recently carried out an experiment at Westfield Shopping Centre where a selection of 30 pieces of fruit and 30 cakes were left on display for members of the public to pick up and eat. After 30 minutes of filming, they found there were six cakes remaining and 14 pieces of fruit. Things changed, however, when they placed a full-length mirror behind the table. This time, people could see themselves picking up the food. After 30 minutes, the opposite occurred – six pieces of fruit and 14 cakes remaining. In other words, people were seeing their reflection and this caused their behaviour to change because they wanted to see themselves making the right choices by not selecting the cakes.

So, place a large mirror in the clinic behind reception desk: people are far less likely to get angry when they can see their own faces. It's also been shown that people act more honestly when mirrors are present so, in areas where you can't see patients, hang up a mirror or a picture of a smiling face. It's not they feel they're being watched, but they do change their actions accordingly.

## Make them commit

A 'gappy' schedule or patient failing to attend means you lose money and profit. If you book your own appointments – or have a staff member do it for you – it is absolutely vital you get the patient to commit to attending the appointment and the way to have this happen is to get the patient to give you a good 'Yes!'

This is really easy provided you phrase the request correctly. Instead of saying: 'Right Mr Evans, we will see you on Thursday 17 May at 2.00pm, take care in the meantime and thanks for calling', you or your team members need to say: 'Mr Evans, we will be seeing you on Thursday 17 May at 2.00pm. In the event that you are unable to attend, will you give us a minimum of 24 hours' notice, please?'

At this point, remain silent. Giving them the silent treatment creates an unconscious pressure where they have to speak – and what's the first word they will say? Yes.

Signage in your waiting room emphasising that the majority of patients attending on time is very much the norm and allows you to give a good service is another nudge.

## And finally...

I spoke to a Romanian dentist friend of mine at the weekend and he told me one about one of his old professors at Bucharest Dental School who said from time to time his students would ask him the following...

'Our patients have up to 32 teeth and 34 cavities around them and not all these are immediately visible or even obvious. How can we motivate them to spend time flossing and cleaning properly, especially when people often lead busy lives?'

He replied: 'Simply tell them to only floss the teeth they wish to keep!' **DH&T**

## Nudge theory?

Is based on research by behavioural economists who discovered a variety of neurological and psychological biases that exist in people's minds that causes them to sometimes make choices contrary to their best interests. The success of nudging shows that it's possible to steer people towards better decisions presenting choice in different and interesting ways.

## MINDSPACE

Professor Paul Dolan, of London School of Economics, suggests there are factors that influence behaviour in a way that is automatic and subconscious.

**M**essenger: Who communicates the ideas and how we perceive them. A good idea to help staff resistant to change in the clinic is to have the benefits of the change brought to their attention not by the boss or practice manager, but by a fellow colleague of the staff member who's enthused about the changes being made.

**I**ncentive: For example, vouchers that increase in value with each negative drug test, until the addict is weaned off, work better than flat incentive schedules.

**N**orms: People follow the actions of others – this is also referred to as social proof. Fashions are a common example.

**D**efaults: People like to do things the easy way and are happy to 'go with the flow'. So, the proportion of people willing to donate organs after death is much higher in 'opt-out' systems than 'opt-in' ones.

**S**alience: Things that are new, novel, funny and appear relevant will be much more likely to be accepted in our minds; easy to see why text messaging and technologies like smart phones have become popular.

**P**riming: Our actions are influenced by cues in the environment of which we're completely unaware eg: people in experiments ate less when they had smaller plates.

**A**ffect: Emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions and thoughts. Ever notice how you can feel drawn to someone you don't know if they have similar facial features to someone else you know and like?

**C**ommitments: We like to remain consistent. If you agree to attend a friend's party suggests that you're much more likely to turn up than not go.

**E**go: We also act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves eg: Being exposed to favourable characteristics of people who exercise increases people's own exercise levels.

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