When Patients Know Something Is Wrong

By Zeña Delling, RDA, CDAA President

Throughout my career as a Registered Dental Assistant and dental assisting educator, I have emphasized the importance of patient safety, recognizing medical concerns, and advocating for those entrusted to our care. Never did I imagine that one day I would find myself on the other side of healthcare, advocating for my own well-being.

Before I was properly diagnosed with MuSK-positive myasthenia gravis, a rare autoimmune neuromuscular disease, I experienced frightening symptoms that were difficult to explain. I frequently choked while eating, even on soft foods, and sometimes on my own saliva. My swallowing muscles had become so weak that I was afraid to eat. Eventually, the muscle weakness progressed to the point that I struggled to hold my head upright. I also experienced difficulty breathing.

Not knowing what was happening to my body made these experiences even more frightening.

My journey toward receiving an accurate diagnosis was not without challenges.

During an appointment with a neurologist, I explained that I did not believe it was safe for me to continue working because I was experiencing double vision. At the time, I also had a midline catheter in my arm while receiving treatment for a sinus infection.

The neurologist questioned my decision not to work and suggested that I could simply wear an eye patch to address my double vision.

I remember asking her, "Do you know what I do for a living?"

I explained that I was a Registered Dental Assistant and that my responsibilities included working inside patients' mouths with sharp dental instruments. I could not imagine that a dentist or patient would feel comfortable having me perform clinical procedures while experiencing visual disturbances and managing an intravenous catheter.

Although the neurologist did not share my concerns about my ability to work, I knew that I had a professional responsibility to protect my patients.

I ultimately decided to seek care elsewhere.

That experience reinforced an important lesson that I now carry with me as both a patient and a dental professional:

Healthcare providers must listen to their patients. A patient's concerns should never be dismissed simply because their symptoms are not immediately visible or fully understood.

As dental professionals, we are trained to recognize potential risks and prevent harm before it occurs. We must apply that same commitment to safety when evaluating our patients' medical histories and listening to their concerns.

My experience taught me that advocating for patient safety sometimes means speaking up, asking difficult questions, and seeking another medical opinion when necessary.

Today, living with MuSK myasthenia gravis has given me a deeper appreciation for the challenges faced by patients with complex medical conditions. It has also reinforced my belief that compassion, communication, and patient advocacy are just as important as our clinical skills.

I share my experience in the hope that it encourages my fellow dental professionals to listen carefully, take patient concerns seriously, and never underestimate the importance of understanding the person behind the medical history.

In an upcoming issue of our journal, I look forward to sharing more about MuSK myasthenia gravis and the important considerations dental professionals should understand when treating patients with neuromuscular disorders. We will explore topics such as airway protection, swallowing difficulties, local anesthesia considerations, and recognizing potential medical emergencies in the dental setting.

My hope is that by sharing both my personal journey and the clinical considerations associated with this disease, I can help increase awareness, encourage continuing education, and contribute to safer dental care for patients living with complex medical conditions.

I spent my career teaching dental assistants how to protect their patients. Living with MuSK myasthenia gravis taught me how important it is for healthcare professionals to listen when a patient says something is wrong.