The fall 2011 issue of Catalyst magazine featured an article on improving the patient experience. It described the feedback of our development team after attending a Software Design Conference in the spring of 2011. The article talked about utilizing technology to actively engage patients in their treatment, as a means to improve overall outcomes. Last winter, my family of four changed dental providers for this reason. I didn’t realize how important this concept of patient engagement was—until all four of us were diagnosed with minor to severe conditions by our new dentist. These conditions had existed for quite some time. They were either not communicated effectively, or dismissed by our former dental provider because they were not covered by our insurance plan. It was a serious and shocking reality check.

Our story goes something like this (names have been changed, except mine, for privacy). We had been patients of Dr. Former for almost seven years. His office was relatively close to our house, and Dr. Former had been a client of PEB for the past 20 years or so. Visits were quick and uneventful. The staff was friendly. The office manager processed our insurance without problems, questions or requests for money. All of us were reminded of our re-care appointments via postcard and telephone call every six months, and all of us religiously prescheduled our hygiene appointments every six months. Occasionally, I went 9-10 months between appointments due to my travel schedule, but for the most part we were model patients. We always prescheduled, always showed up on time—and, when we got a bill, always paid on time.

Dr. Former was not using digital x-rays or electronic charts. Despite years of hints and suggestions, he remained firm in his decision to utilize only the front desk portion of the XLdent software. After a while, we stopped suggesting—yet remained loyal, unassuming patients.

Being in the dental software development business and raising two boys makes for a busy life—so busy that my husband and I glazed over the importance of good communication between patient and healthcare provider in our own lives. My husband loved going to Dr. Former because he was in and out of the chair in less than 30 minutes; he was never badgered about removal of his wisdom teeth, as was the case with previous clinicians. The appointments for the boys took 20 minutes at most; truth be told, I liked the quick appointments because it meant we could all get back to our busy schedules sooner. Our checkups were always good. First Born had a perfect bite. Second Born had strong, slightly crooked teeth, which Dr. Former suggested we talk to an orthodontist about. Husband had strong teeth and a great bite. I had good
teeth with a bunch of restorations that were holding on very nicely.

It was only after we attended the Healthcare Software Design Conference, and after some reflection on a recent physical examination, that I started to question and review our family’s healthcare treatment and options. It was not just a review of our dental clinic. We also put our GPs, eye doctors and dermatologists under the microscope. The evaluations were long overdue and resulted in some needed changes. When we stacked visits and healthcare providers next to each other for the purpose of comparison, the differences in our patient experiences were clearly obvious.

Our medical clinic received the highest score, with the kids’ eye doctor coming in second. The kids’ dermatologist was a close third, my husband’s eye doctor was fourth and our dental clinic was last. Our evaluation included:

1. Open communication with our doctor and doctor/team knowledge of our previous/current conditions and concerns.

2. Overall organization of the visit, from the point of scheduling to visit departure. This included the knowledge the staff had about us as people, our treatment needs and overall family account.

3. Convenience of reviewing our records, appointment coordination and reminders, reviewing our statements and making payments on-line.

After doing a bit of research, we decided to try another dental clinic. The kids and I were the first to schedule appointments with Dr. Wonderful. Dr. Wonderful is also an XL Dent client and uses the entire suite of products, including electronic charting, digital image management and the patient portal. The doctor’s exam on First Born confirmed that he has great teeth, but that his anterior teeth were now crowded due to his wisdom teeth coming in—so his perfect smile and perfect bite weren’t so perfect any more.

The doctor recommended that the wisdom teeth be removed, and informed First Born that if he wanted to be sedated, that would likely not be covered by insurance. He also told First Born that all of his sealants were in poor condition and he might want to consider having them reapplied before he left home to attend college. His clinical interview identified that First Born grew up drinking only well water and bottled rather than tap water, which is usually fluoridated. This was news to First Born, because he didn’t remember having any of these conversations with Dr. Former.

Meanwhile, I was in the next room getting my cleaning. The doctor was preparing to begin my clinical interview and exam when the hygienist came to stand next to me. She asked if it was O.K. to give First Born some new sealants. She showed me the teeth to be treated on a tablet PC, and confidently explained the importance of sealants, especially now that First Born was going off to college. She also explained that because of his age, insurance no longer covered them—so the service would need to be paid for today. “Wow,” I thought, and then I responded, “Yes of course, apply the sealants; it’s not a problem that they will not be covered by insurance. My son’s cavity-free teeth need to stay that way.”

My visit included a full perio probe and four bitewings, which I saw on the patient
view monitor—and again on the tablet PC, when the hygienist reviewed pocket depths with me. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen the clinical results of dental software in development, testing, and real-life operatory environments, but this was the first time I actually experienced the technology and concepts in connection with my own treatment. It was wonderful!

The next part was my reality check. I was diagnosed with a failed restoration and decay on #14. I also had a failed restoration, crack and decay on #30. Dr. Wonderful turned on his intra-oral camera and showed me exactly what he was talking about. He proposed to replace the restoration on 14 with another white filling and to do a crown on 30. As he was formulating the treatment plan on his tablet PC, he showed me my chart, my x-rays and intra-oral photos again—all while explaining why I needed the treatment and how he was going to provide it. “Wow,” I thought again. During that visit, I don’t know if I was more impressed with the doctor’s skills or more proud of the appointments, review the costs of treatment, answer my questions, and ask for a down payment. I didn’t have to say anything. She already knew exactly what the doctor had planned for me! In very short order, the doctor appeared and wanted to speak with me again. He informed me that Second Born had decay in two teeth. One looked pretty bad, and his sealants were also long gone. We reviewed the x-rays together. I approved the treatment plan, and paid for the sealants. We all went home, loving our new dentist! Of course, the news of decay, the wisdom teeth removal recommendation and a needed crown were downers, but all three of us walked out of there feeling very well taken care of. We all felt like Dr. Wonderful and his entire team really had it together and that they were genuinely concerned about our healthy smiles.

Two weeks later, my husband woke up with unbearable pain in the lower left quadrant of his mouth. I called Dr. Wonderful’s office and made an emergency appointment that very morning. Husband was diagnosed with severe periodontitis. He was told that if his wisdom teeth didn’t come out, the perio treatment would be difficult — and he might eventually lose some teeth anyway. He was also shown his exam on screen as it was occurring, saw what was causing his pain on the digital x-ray, and was engaged by technology to discuss his options with the doctor.

I scheduled my husband’s appointment with an oral surgeon two weeks after his emergency perio scaling. He is now missing teeth 1, 16, 17 and 32 and claims to have ghost pains. After a “ghost pain,” he smiles and smirks until we both laugh. He tells all his friends that he wanted to put his teeth under his pillow and wait for the tooth fairy to come, but the doctor wouldn’t let him take them home. My husband’s periodontitis is now classified as mild. He has a renewed feeling of “being healthy” as he approaches another milestone birthday, is actually feeling better than he has in a long time, and is very happy that those wisdom teeth are gone. Does patient engagement really have this much impact on a person’s treatment outcome?

Our first born son also had his wisdom teeth extracted at the recommendation of our new dentist, after witnessing my husband’s perio ordeal. Recently, he called me from college to say that his teeth are getting straight again. I told him that’s great, and that if they needed a little help, we could consider Invisalign. It is our second-born son’s diagnosis that I have a great deal of guilt about. If we had been more involved with exams, his tooth decay might have been averted. If I had asked when his last sealants were placed and how they were holding up, maybe he would still have all of his tooth structure. I’m not really sure how our dental maintenance got so out of control. But one thing is for certain—the same scrutiny we applied to the development of our dental software products will be applied to the management of our healthcare from now on.

Since the beginning of the year, my husband has also changed eye doctors. Dr. Wonderful now ranks number one in our “best healthcare experience” evaluations. Good patient experiences really do translate into improved patient outcomes. Our family is proof.

During that visit, I don’t know if I was more impressed with the doctor’s skills or more proud of the XLDent tools he was using—both made my patient experience and pending treatment outcomes the best they could possibly be.