

TO TELL OR NOT TO TELL? OR DO I HAVE TO TELL?

Shannon E. Hassin
Michelle E. Ziegler
Medical University of South Carolina

Dr. Pulcinella a new dental resident was prepared to begin an elective esthetic dental procedure for a minor patient Jessie. This procedure was previously discussed and consented to by the patient's mother.

After observing a change in the patient's disposition Dr. Pulcinella asked Jessie if everything is OK at which point the minor patient disclosed she was pregnant. This new medical information necessitated canceling the patients planned appointment, which the mom is expecting to begin today.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Shayna Pulcinella was in her late twenties and has just finished dental school. She was lucky enough to be accepted to a residency program and was particularly excited to gain all the additional dental experience she could before heading out to private practice. She did not realize what other experiences she would learn along the way though.

FIRST VISIT

It was just another typical Friday afternoon on the clinic floor and a patient presents for an esthetic consult. Upon entering the room, Dr Pulcinella realizes it was a 17-year-old and her mother. Jessie was a particularly happy teenager. She presented with her mother and it seemed their bond is quite close, just like Dr. Pulcinella and her mother. In conversation with them they completed each other's sentences and laughed together. She had just got her braces taken off and was worried about small spaces that were between her front teeth. Elective esthetic options were discussed with mother and patient and it was decided that Jessie would have bonding (cosmetic restorations) done to correct the spacing. Jessie's mom signed the treatment plan giving consent for the procedure since Jessie was a minor and an appointment was scheduled for their next visit. Jessie and mom were both very excited to return and get the work done.

THE PROCEDURE

The day came for Jessie to get her esthetic bonding completed. Dr. Pulcinella was excited to do this for Jessie because she knew how much she and her mom were looking forward to it. Dr. Pulcinella walked in with a big smile on her face ready to work.

“Hi Jessie, so good to see you! Are you excited the day is finally here? How is everything going with you?”

Dr. Pulcinella could tell that Jessie was not as happy as she was at last visit, but she thought it could possibly be anxiety about the appointment. She questioned Jessie further trying to put her at ease.

Jessie, with a straight face replied, “I’m just overwhelmed with everything.”

Dr. Pulcinella replied with “Is everything okay? School problems? Friend problems? Boy problems? Everything okay at home?”

Jessie’s eyes got glassy and she stated “boy problems.” After a brief pause, “I took 3 pregnancy tests this morning and I’m pregnant.”

Dr. Pulcinella remembered how close Jessie and her mother were and hoped Jessie had discussed this with her mom since she would need to cancel this planned elective procedure due to the pregnancy.

“I told my boyfriend who I’ve been dating for 5 years and he cried hysterically and then eventually calmed down and thought it could be cool” Jessie continued. I haven’t told my mom though. She is going to freak out, but then maybe come to her senses since she had me at my age. I think she’d be okay with me having this baby, but I honestly do not know.”

Dr. Pulcinella asked “Have you been to your gynecologist? Do you know how far along you might be?” Jessie had no idea about anything and appeared to be in somewhat of a state of shock.

Dr. Pulcinella felt her heart race a little faster than usual. She had been trained in handling difficult situations in dental school classes, but nothing like this. She knew she had to be strong and unbiased towards the patient. Dr. Pulcinella knew she could not proceed with any treatment because of her pregnancy. She also needed to protect Jessie’s privacy and did not want anyone else to hear Jessie and pass any judgement on her. Jessie was also a minor so Dr. Pulcinella questioned what to do in this situation.

She thought to herself- How did she not tell her mother? I thought that they were so close? I have to make her tell her mother! Am I allowed to tell her mother if she doesn't! Is this HIPPA violation? What am I going to say to her mom, my assistant and my front desk when I dismiss Jessie without doing the planned procedure? What do I do?!