

American Dentistry: On the Edge, the Dangerous Edge

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American dentistry has developed into a sea of technicians who are not satisfied with producing esthetic dentistry. Now, they are driving to produce invisible dentistry. That's nice.

There is, however, a glaring and very visible problem: the neglect of the responsibility of the doctor to the patient. While the dentist should always hold esthetics as part of the solution, there are other aspects to treatment that are more critical to the practice than how white or straight or dazzling the laboratory can make the teeth.

When was the patient - the person behind the teeth - relegated to second place? When did cosmetics and how the teeth looked become so important that it no longer mattered if the patient came in with glaring and obvious signs and symptoms? When did the dentist stop being a doctor to front for (and take credit for) the laboratory technician? When did beauty replace health as the focus of attention?

If I were an attorney, I'd be ecstatic to see the wealth of the cosmetic dentists grow because I know I'm going to be able to dip into those pockets and get a big chunk of that money for myself. All I have to do is find a patient that was improperly diagnosed and had some kind of problem happen. The fact is, I can easily find thousands of such patients!

We could go as far back as Plato who said that the mouth is a reflection of the body or as close as Dr. Albert Schweitzer who said the same thing. We could cite the Surgeon General's Report of May 2000 that directly and blatantly linked the health of the mouth to the health of the rest of the body. We could quote medical icons who realized and verbalized that the tongue is the mirror of the body. We could then ask to see the records of the dentists and see which ones ever bothered to examine the tongue - which is surely in the realm of the dentist.

How many dentists charged their patients \$20,000 to redesign their smile and never once bothered to consider the cause of the holes in the patient's teeth. A hole in a tooth is as significant as a hole in a leg. No body part is designed to develop holes and such a finding cannot be ignored by the doctor and still have the doctor think he's discharging his responsibility to the patient.

If I were an attorney - which I'm not; I'm a dentist - I'd look at the dental profession as a vast feeding ground because no dentist looks beyond the teeth, even though only about 20% of the dentist's professional education was about fixing teeth. The other 80% was about the human body; how it gets sick and why it stays well.

As an attorney, I'd ask the dentist on the witness stand if he thought saliva was something in the dentist's realm (since it bathes everything he touches and his fingers are always in it). I'm sure the dentist would agree that it was. I'd ask the dentist what he knew about saliva and he'd probably have very little to say. In fact, the more he said, the deeper he'd be digging his own grave because there would be nothing about the patient's saliva on the examination sheet or in the records. The dentist probably did not even take the patient's salivary pH! And then, as the sharp attorney I would be, I'd pull out a tiny piece of litmus paper (range 6 - 8) and stick it in my mouth. I'd determine my salivary pH right in front of the jury and learn more about my saliva in 7 seconds than this dentist ever cared to learn about his patient's saliva. And then we'd discuss the ramifications of acidic saliva.

And then I'd ask what the dentist is supposed to examine when he examines a patient and the defendant dentist will likely say something mundane and stupid because if he said anything of value, he'd be digging that grave deeper and deeper.

I'd ask what swollen ankles would mean to the dentist and he'd likely reply that it could mean a congestive heart problem or something else that had nothing to do with teeth - and that would open him up to a barrage of things he ignored.

Ultimately, I'd get this defendant to admit that the dentist is responsible for examining the head and neck and all exposed parts of the body. I'd ask if he were familiar with the medical textbook devoted solely to the fingernails - and indicate that the subject was so important that an entire textbook was written about it (a Saunders publication written by Drs. Sher and Daniel). Of course, he wouldn't know it but would likely admit that blue nails might mean cyanosis. And that would open up another barrage of things he'd wish I didn't know.

I'd ask if he thought he was a good doctor and either way he answered would be his demise. If he said no, he'd incriminate himself. If he said yes, I'd ask him the criteria he used to say such a thing and he'd likely resort to some flimsy excuse like standard of care, claiming nobody examines those things I listed should be examined - even though they should!

So, he'd indict all of his colleagues and the dam will have burst.

There'd be plenty of prosecuting for me and plenty of lawsuits for everyone else.

And there would be little defense. Dentists were taught to do things and they don't do it. Dentists were taught the normal and don't respond when they see the abnormal. Dentists make a big stink about being oral physicians and do nothing but focus on the teeth. Dentists call themselves doctors and only give technician treatment. Dentists took all of those courses about human biology and had to prove mastery of so many esoteric subjects so many times on so many levels. Yet, they never look beyond the teeth and gums. Dentists display their laminated and framed degrees from dental schools but act only like gum gardeners and tooth carpenters, not exactly what the school administrations would say they taught.

Oh, yes. The pickings would be ripe if I were a lawyer. However, I really like dentistry and don't want to be a lawyer. What I'd like to see is my colleagues doing those things they were trained to do and rendering a service to their patients that would truly be based on the tenets of health, not just health care.

Can you imagine what we could do as a profession if we started to use the vast amount of knowledge we worked so hard to attain? Can you imagine if we conveyed to the patient how critical it is to not ignore the obvious signs that stare us in the face, signs and signals from the body that tell the world something is wrong and biological systems of the body are not functioning as they should? Can you imagine the stir we would cause if, after the physician pronounces the patient healthy, we say that isn't so and then prove it by listing things like canker sores; gingival purulence; yellow, green, brown and orange tongue coatings; lackluster fingernails with white spots and dark streaks and no lunulae; holes in the hardest structure in the body; bone loss and loose teeth; acidic saliva; halitosis and TMJ subluxations that are likely contributing to hosts of other problems?

Dentistry, if practiced as it was taught to be practiced, would jump to a level at which managed care could not compete. Dentists would be thrust to the forefront of the health care industry and gain power and influence never before conceived.

One of the professions (law or dentistry) is going to have a bonanza.

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