

A Time to Choose

This excerpt from the 1996 commencement address for Tufts University School of Dental Medicine by Dr Lloyd Miller, a renowned and much admired prosthodontist, is a significant contribution to the current discussion and debate about the future of our profession. Students, recent graduates, and practicing dentists alike would be well served by following the ideas and precepts described in this stimulating and encouraging presentation.

Gerald M. Kramer, DMD

When I entered Tufts Dental School in 1954, I was little prepared for the electrifying experience of gross anatomy. The exquisite and extraordinary privilege of dissecting and studying a human body transformed me from an ordinary student to one on a mission. All of you, my colleagues, are now programmed in a similar fashion. You are no longer ordinary people. As my friend Dr Gerry Carrier, former president of the Massachusetts Dental Society, likes to advise, "Remember who you are!" You are unique, goal oriented, talented, and dedicated. Don't pretend to be something you aren't. Your practice will not be an ordinary business with a profit/loss war, measured by daily or quarterly returns. Indeed, the gurus of dental practice management who measure you by your gross production would have you play championship tennis while watching the scoreboard instead of keeping your eye on the ball. But you are committed to your career.

Now is the time to CHOOSE. A whole new world is about to unfold for you, one in which you have a responsible CHOICE—something that may have escaped you for the last 4 years. You chose this profession and now you have the exquisite opportunity to make that choice work. No professor will be sitting on your shoulder grading you on your professionalism or the quality of your restorations. Your support system has vanished like the fog on a warm day. You have a choice: will you "choose the high road or the low road," as my colleague Dr Gerald Kramer, world renowned periodontist and journal editor would ask. Your standards and yours alone will determine the quality of care your patients will receive. We all have our own "good enough" meter to check our level of acceptance. Make sure yours is properly calibrated and that it reads the very best you can be.

I have made many mistakes, but they did not end my mission. Success is a direction you choose to take. I have lots of friends and former students who have made that choice and are considered master dentists. They hail from all five continents and even towns around us such as Holden, North Reading, and New Bedford. They have the following characteristics:

1. These master dentists have developed superb technical and people skills—an area of development that you have barely scratched. A conscientious endeavor in that direction will get you on the fast track to success. Your success will enhance your self-reliance, but be careful: success can be a lousy teacher. It seduces people into thinking they can't lose, that they must be infallible. But your failures will teach you about survival and your ability to learn and get on with your mission.
2. Master dentists are perpetual students. The cutting edge of dental treatments has been on a roll for the last few decades. Advances in materials, adhesives, implants, fluoridation, and periodontal disease have altered the face of dentistry forever. This is the golden age of dentistry, where the contemporary dentist has the excitement of constantly changing treatment options.
3. Master dentists have a philosophy of life and develop a high-calibre professional image. You are now a doctor, and people expect more of you than of others. If you have no philosophy yet, I will offer one to you: The Golden Rule—do unto others as you wish to be treated. Develop a heart for your patients. Almost every patient who comes to me for consultation asks me or is interested in how I would treat one of my family if they had the same problem. Aren't they asking me where my HEART is? Like others, I have an imaginary bank or heart fund. I use it annually to help the deserving. Services are delivered at a reduced fee or eliminated altogether—paid for by the invisible fund. You can do the same by giving something back to those who support you. Treat your patients with head, hands, and heart.
4. Master dentists dare to risk failure for development. The poet Robert Frost wrote: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I/I took the one less traveled by/And that has made all the difference." Frost's poem is about the choices we make; it is also about character. You will spend a lifetime maturing your character and developing trust and integrity—do not part with them at any price. Settling for average may hinder your development.
5. Master dentists possess immense integrity. What is integrity? Everybody talks about it but few know what to do about it. We all want mountains of the stuff. It's difficult to define but easy to recognize. Honesty is not enough. If I say to a patient, "your mouth is a garbage heap and smells like a barnyard," I may be honest but I have little concern for the patient. Rather, I might say, "How can I help you to keep your mouth healthy?" Honesty alone does not add up to integrity. And integrity builds trust, which is critical to success with patients.
6. Master dentists possess great passion for their profession. This passion translates into energy from the heart, leading to a positive flow of energy between the doctor, patients and staff. Passion is the handmaiden to charisma. While not many are gifted with charisma and panache, all of you can be known for your passion for your profession.

There are immense opportunities for success with the right choices. We are all a bit nervous about the future of our beloved profession. Business people and politicians who are slaves to the quarterly returns and the bottom line are ready to tell us how to treat our patients. Managed care has a stranglehold on physicians, often limiting patient contact to 10 to 15 minutes.

But the bright side of dentistry is just developing. We now have a dramatic improvement in what people demand from dentistry. People are choosing to have implants or improve their image through dentistry. Maintaining the health of the body, including the mouth, has become a primary goal of vast numbers of people with or without insurance. And people will always seek out and pay for what they value.

The Pew Commission is the hallmark for guidelines in the health field. In December 1995 the Pew Commission reported the following about dentistry.

1. Dentistry has maintained an outstanding record in cost containment, prevention, specialist/generalist ratios, and active involvement in the community—all vigorously criticized parts of the medical profession. The vast majority of dental care is still determined by single dentists practicing in ambulatory settings. We are by and large outside the traditional health insurance payment mechanism.
2. For the future the Pew report predicts an undersupply of dentists with the 4,000 graduates per year now in place. The present level of 57 dentists per 100,000 population will drop to about 45 per 100,000 by the year 2020. Rev up your turbines!!!

So, as you commence your chosen career I offer you these thoughts:

- Choose to consistently produce your personal best on a daily basis. Be a marathon runner rather than a sprinter. Remember Uta Pippig in the Boston Marathon this year.
- Choose to be patient with yourself. I opened my private practice in Weston, Massachusetts in June 1959. Six weeks later the telephone rang with the first patient, an emergency. I extracted a lower central incisor with my fingers and sent a bill for 5 dollars. The patient never paid. At the end of that calendar year I had grossed \$3,579.00, and about one-third of that was rent. There was nowhere to go except up.
- Choose to keep your brain active. Treat it like a muscle that needs constant exercise to survive. And remember that the mind reaches obsolescence the fastest.
- Choose to give something back to all those who participated in your development: your family, friends, teachers, and your university.
- Choose to walk with grace and pride knowing that you are a good person in a very honorable profession.

I wish you great success in all your endeavors for all the days of your life. And may your God hold you in the palms of his hands.

Lloyd L. Miller, BS, DMD, FACD, FICD

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