I Don't Know

As one becomes aware of the surrounding world in the process of growth and maturation, there is an inherent belief that whatever one needs to know can be learned by finding someone with the answers to that particular question. Initially that source is a parent or sibling, later one's older and (and presumably wiser) friends, then a succession of teachers and mentors. When one becomes literate, books become a chief source for knowledge. Television has become another early learning encounter—both positively and negatively. At some point in cerebral maturation, intellect evolves to insert a measure of doubt into the learning process and credibility values are assigned.

Now all of this does not take place in a methodical, calculated fashion, of course. The process of education is a progressive one and undoubtedly differs for each of us. Some individuals are inherently more trusting (more naive, less prone to challenge) than others. Some individuals seem to ask questions more for the sake of asking than for learning. Some have a boundless curiosity, others seek only the most basic, essential information. There is a wide range of motive behind inquiry. Nonetheless, most questions are asked with the desire of obtaining answers—and—back to my original premise, with the feeling that the desired information is available.

The process of formal education is designed to put the people with the questions (students) together with the people with the answers (teachers). This places a great deal of responsibility on the individual who is trusted to have valid information. Sometimes the honor of having been placed in the mentoring position leads an individual to assume that the bestowing of the title of professor (or instructor, or lecturer, or whatever) is accompanied by instant and endless wisdom. The feeling seems to be that any answer given ex officio is inherently valid.

Also, many of us have been guilty of underestimating the intelligence and depth of understanding of the questioner. Many who read this are educators and will relate to this with specific individuals in mind. I recall one student who never asked a question until he had exhausted the literature on the subject and understood the broad base of known fact concerning the given topic. Such students unknowingly become apt teach-teachers. It is often from an association with such students that one learns the need to use that most essential of phrases—"I don't know." When an instructor (or anyone else, for that matter) can confidently and unashamedly answer a question with those three words, it is a sign of one's increased maturation as an educator. I can remember what was probably the first time I was able to use that phrase in response to a student and find it a positive expression—not a negative one.

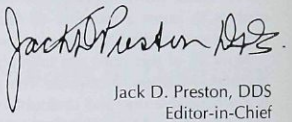
Until one can overcome the egocentric need to provide an answer without sufficient factual basis for doing so or to proffer an *opinion* disguised in the cloak of *knowledge*, that person is of limited value in the process of educating another human being. Sometimes it is insufficient knowledge or shallow thinking that prompts one to believe that the parroting of dogma suffices as an adequate answer to a probing question. The feeling that the stated answer must be correct because it is what is often repeated, may be found in print, or is commonly believed is not adequate evidence that it is correct. Remember, it was once a majority opinion that the earth was flat. In the absence of incontrovertible evidence, all "knowledge" should be suspect, and some essence of doubt might be well retained for some of the "incontrovertible evidence" as well.

As damning as the conveyance of ignorance packaged as knowledge may be in the classroom or in personal encounters, the publication of articles and books carries this malfeasance even farther. In spite of the best efforts of any editor or publisher, not every article that is published conveys fact. Book and publications, especially those that are not peer reviewed, should be read with a certain measure of skepticism, and any article should be viewed with some measure of healthy doubt. Such sources of information seem virtuous in comparison to what occurs on some podiums at the innumerable meetings that are held around the world. One can frequently hear the most outrageous of statements made from the podium, and catapulting to conclusions based on minimal clinical experience and even less scientific merit is rampant. The pressure placed on the podium prophets today is to entertain and to educate at the same time. Some presenters often seem to relish the opportunity to pontificate, and the paucity of scientifically sound information or absence of the success of a sufficient number of documented successes over a significant period of time does not deter the "expert" from extolling the merits of a particular procedure or product. As one of my correspondents put it, "They are like rock stars trying to outdo their last album—trying to please hungry fans." Is this what our conferences and society meetings have

become—entertainment packaged as wisdom? I applaud those meetings that offer critiques of presentations and provide the opportunity for challenge to the concepts, procedures, and materials discussed. This does not mean that every new idea should be discarded—quite the contrary. We live in a time of the exponential expansion of knowledge and progress. This makes it even more essential that as we deviate from the main highway of our past procedures we approach that new path with caution and with constant re-appraisal of the merits of pursuing the course we are taking. We should constantly challenge our own wisdom and the limits of our understanding as well as the credibility and limitation of our own observations. This certainly applies to such procedures as dental implants, using new restorative materials, and embarking upon tissue regeneration techniques. Patients have the right to know the limitations of our understanding of the scientific basis supporting such procedures and the absence of relevant long-term data justifying them.

I applaud the lecturer, writer, and educator who is able to respond to a question with "I don't know," and I revere those who follow that statement with the active search for truth by attempting to fill the void in their knowledge with valid research, open minds, and who actively seek truth—whatever that truth may be— even when it is contradictory to previously stated opinion. I applaud those who are able to say "I was wrong when I said (or did) that" or who openly admit to the limitations of their past or present knowledge. No one is blessed with the total perspective of truth, and, as much as the student (listener, reader, conference attendee, or patient) would like to be given the simple, fail-proof solution, no one should package bias and egocentric claims in the guise of truth and wisdom.

"I don't know" is a simple, easily understood phrase. It is unequivocal, it is not deceptive, and it requires no great talent to utter. Let us hope that it is used more widely, and, as its use becomes more common, may the *real* truths stand out more clearly as the need to separate them from ego, ignorance, and deception is diminished.



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Erratum

In the article "The Influence of Mixing Temperature and Powder/Liquid Ratio on the Film Thickness of Three Glass-Ionomer Cements" (Int J Prosthodont 1993;7:13-16), the last two sentences of the Materials and Methods section were printed incorrectly. They inadvertently were changed to read:

The ranked data for each cement were statistically compared using an analysis of variance and Tukey's studentized range test ($P < .05$) because comparisons were made between different cements. The scope of this investigation was too narrow to suggest the superiority of any one cement.

They should read as follows:

The ranked data for each cement were statistically compared using an analysis of variance and Tukey's studentized range test ($P < .05$). No comparisons were made between different cements because the scope of this investigation was too narrow to suggest the superiority of any one cement.

Reprints noting this correction are available from Dr William W. Brackett, DDS, MSD, Operative Dentistry, Department of General Dentistry, College of Dentistry, The University of Tennessee, 875 Union Avenue, Memphis, TN 38163. The publisher regrets this error.