

# Editorial

## Dentistry and the Internet—enthusiasm mixed with caution

The opportunity for unlimited, rapid access to vast quantities of knowledge, via computers and the Internet, is upon us. But while access to the Internet is exciting and full of potential for education, for technology transfer, and even for ordering supplies and materials, it can also test one's patience while ploughing through mounds of useless, unedited information. Even worse, the information found on the Internet bulletin boards can also be misleading.

Who has the time to sieve through oceans of sludge to find the pearl? I recently scanned a dental bulletin board; the discussion concerned sealants. The level of knowledge shocked me and quickly brought home that it is not necessarily the most progressive or knowledgeable colleagues who are conversing electronically.

One example concerns a discussion on pit and fissure sealants. A writer was proposing, as best I could tell, that all sealant application should involve preparation of the fissure "with the smallest bur possible, and then etch and fill . . ." The writer asked if sealant, placed on a small carious lesion, would arrest the decay. He proposed doing a preventive resin restoration (PRR) on every tooth needing a sealant. Had he been aware of the many studies that have addressed the question of caries under sealants dating back to Handelman's early work of the 1970s and more recently the work of Mertz-Fairhurst, he would know that caries does, in fact, arrest under a well-placed sealant. The writer would then not mislead other readers of the dental bulletin board into thinking that his recommendation has validity. The PRR is an excellent restoration—the key word here is *restoration*. A sealant is meant to be a preventive technique.

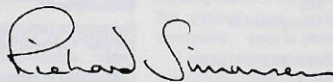
The writer followed with a further display of ignorance. "Have there been any studies that really establish the long term efficacy of 'sealants' where the base of the fissured groove is not reached or dealt with?" he asked. Just about every study that has ever been done on sealants has been done without fissure preparation! Maybe the writer should spend a little

more time with his journals rather than with his computer. The writer added a telling sentence: "I also charge for a filling, not a sealant:-) Note the keyboard equivalent of a smiling face, if you look at it sideways:-), after his self-serving commentary. Is economic gain perhaps the main reason for his treatment choice and thus the cause of his misleading the readers of the dental bulletin board?"

While the Internet offers dentists, and all others, a great opportunity for learning and access to information, we must be cautious about the equally great opportunity to waste time and to be led astray by incorrect, biased, or even malicious information. The main problem is that while there is plenty of worthwhile material on the Internet, the organization, reliability, and authenticity of the material is not as reliable as it is in a library.

What I have seen so far of discussions of dental topics on the Internet does not impress me. Since the whole system is designed to be free and open, as it should be, it means the potential for vast quantities of inaccurate information mixed with a few pearls of wisdom is great. In addition, if it takes longer to dig up useful information on the Internet than it would take to access it through other sources (ie, the library)—because there is simply too much information out there and so many tempting side roads to take—then the investment of time away from other activities is simply not worth it.

Venture forward with excitement and enthusiasm on the so-called electronic highway. But temper your enthusiasm with caution. Like any computer program, or any book, or even a journal article, the information accessible on the Internet is only as good as the authors.



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