

## Always ask “Why?”

Ever since we were students, we have been taught to follow roles, recipes, and dogmas. Good students, eyes on the blackboard and hands writing in the notebook, doing whatever the teacher says, no questions asked. Why bother asking? Books can't be wrong; and what needs to be done in order to get high grades is to read them, memorize them, and ace them during the exam.

This is how we learned that  $1 + 1 = 2$ , what happened in our history, or where electricity comes from. With those learning experiences and good grades, we got into medical school. Medicine seems even more precise at the beginning. Anatomy and histology are the exact reflection of the human body; epidemiology comes from authentic statistical collection. Again, we find ourselves memorizing, following our books' and teachers' recommendations, and by doing that, excelling.

The problem is that when we start treating our patients, we are already stuck in the learning methods that brought us here. In this way, we continue to do what we heard in class, what our professor “likes,” what the instructor on the floor “believes” will be the best treatment, or what worked well for our classmate the previous day.

We lose the passion to ask “Why?” in the way we did as kids. Why twice the etching time when it comes to primary teeth? Why is it so difficult to numb an inflamed site? Why do we see more lichen planus flare-ups following the holidays?

By asking “Why?” for every step we take, for each individual patient, we can dramatically enhance our understanding of the nature of the disease, the treatment we offer, and provide better service to our patient population.

Always asking “Why?” before every procedure, instead of doing exactly as the books or teachers asked or taught us, will also make the treatment fit better to the specific case. After all, books and teachers won't cover everything.

From the beginning of the first visit, we need to ask “Why?” Why did the symptoms occur in this particular patient? What is the disease we are treating? Why are we offering this specific treatment to this particular patient at this certain time point?

When it comes to the materials selection for treatments, why do we prefer this one over the other? Have we thought about the specific case we are treating or are we just following a protocol we are familiar with? When we listen to recommendations from colleagues, teachers, salespersons, and others, we should always be critical and ask the right questions before buying new equipment or starting to use new materials. Asking the questions and then finding the answers in an evidence-based approach will improve our dental practice.

This questioning phase should continue on a regular basis to make sure we always know why we are doing what we are about to do. Is the treatment scheduled for today still aligned with the overall treatment plan? Is the treatment plan still valid for the disease we are trying to cure for that patient? Have we completed the treatment and brought the patient to a healthy maintainable state?

We should then plan the follow-up. How long for intervals? When is the next follow-up exam? Are we sure the patient knows what they should do at home in the meantime to maintain their health?

During the process of always asking “Why?” the procedure from the first visit to follow-up becomes more distinct. All the questions that we sometimes ignored, or were not used to asking, have answers that can enhance our understanding of the profession and create a great journey of lifelong learning. The process of asking “Why?” and pursuing the answers also makes memorizing much easier. Following recipes and dogmas is occasionally useful, but as health care professionals we need to learn how to question our steps and rationalize each one of them to suit the specific patient needs.

As educators we should encourage our students to question, discuss, and seek answers, even when we tell them what we prefer to do. As practitioners we need to develop and sharpen those skills every day. This will make our job more interesting and much more effective, and will benefit our patients in the short and the long term. ■■

Yi-zhou Tan  
Department of Periodontology, School of Stomatology,  
The Fourth Military Medical University, Xi'an, China

Liran Levin, DMD  
Associate Editor



Yi-zhou Tan



Liran Levin

