

The Information Marketplace

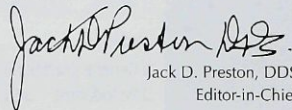
Having just returned from a series of meetings over the past weeks, I have once again been reminded of the power of a persuasive speaker. Charismatic individuals who are able to charm and persuade their audiences have a great influence on the perception of what techniques and materials are desirable and useful. However, scientific evidence is frequently lacking from many of the presentations. No matter how persuasive an individual's opinion is, the premise must always be subjected to the light of scientific principle, and any conclusions should be evidence based, not merely anecdotal. Nonetheless, much of what is being fed to audiences by the podium prophets is subjective and of questionable value. It is unfortunate that those responsible for structuring these programs and inviting the participants do not find better means of focusing on what is of merit and what is yet unproven. It is my impression that self-ordained experts are becoming increasingly commonplace, and are arising out of greed rather than need. The allure of recognition and momentary acclamation as well as the hope of monetary reward often foreshadow the essential necessity of presenting only conscientiously derived information that has been adequately documented. Modern presentation techniques, often using impressive videotapes and graphics, can entertain and delight audiences who might become so enraptured by the medium that the message is swallowed whole, without adequate mental mastication and cerebral digestion. The old saw of the preacher's notes scribbled in the margin of his next Sunday's sermon, "point is a little weak here—pound pulpit and gesture wildly," has, I fear, been replaced with: "add a 3-D graphic and inflate the scale—maybe they won't notice that the difference isn't significant."

When data are presented, the merit of the evidence offered must still be questioned. For example, there has traditionally been a great deal of emphasis placed on the amount of marginal gap resulting from the use of a given technique or material for processing a restoration. The results often are obtainable only if the materials being investigated are manipulated under very stringent conditions, and by strict adherence to challenging techniques. What might be of more interest is how the material (technique) functions when used by the average individual in the usual and common environment. Clinical accuracy has always defied expression in precise terms, and frequently when it is stated, the actual accomplishment has not matched the verbal pronouncement of the achievable (and expected) result. It is my fear that we often conduct research in microns and practice in millimeters. The so-called "technique sensitivity" of a material or process might be of greater importance than the optimal result obtainable under ideal circumstances. Sometimes our attention is diverted away from the weakness of a material by the lecturer or salesperson—sometimes it is difficult to discern between

the two) stressing a feature that "has good numbers" but which is less important in actual use.

Of further concern are the graphics that are used to document presentations. As presentation techniques make greater use of electronic media, there is increasing potential for abuse of the ability to "enhance" the results obtained. This is not a new concern, for it has long been recognized that tissue color can be influenced by film choice or filtration to accentuate or diminish apparent "inflammation." However, the opportunity to alter the results of therapy is much greater with electronic techniques, and already such deceptive practices have been discerned in some presentations. (This has also necessitated a disclaimer that images submitted for publication in this journal have not been electronically enhanced.) Such alterations are almost undetectable, and one must rely on the ethics and honesty of the individual presenting. I hope that as a critical audience we have not become so demanding that an excellent clinical result is not adequate and that only "perfection" will be accepted.

Those who choose to step to the podium and advocate any technique or procedure incur a responsibility beyond that of providing a pleasant diversion and a visual treat. Audiences naively expect that credibility precedes an invitation to present before any group. Speakers have a responsibility to be honest in presenting both the attributes as well as the weaknesses of any procedure, and should also divulge the likelihood of the result presented being replicable by others of equal or lesser skill. When a procedure appears to be successful but lacks a preponderance of evidence relating the effect to the cause, the audience has a right to know that the speaker is relying on conjecture, not evidence. The desire to inform should take precedence over the desire to perform. Self aggrandizement and the need for recognition should never supersede the obligation to honestly and completely enlighten and inform the audience. Audiences are provided an opportunity to experience vicariously a wide variety of techniques and procedures, but, parallel to encounters in the commercial arena, the caveat is "let the viewer beware." No matter how glib, personable, or likable the presenter might be, no matter how sophisticated the medium, or how entertaining the presentation, the listener must retain the ability to invoke the tenets of science and the principles of logic. It is doubtful that the number of pseudoexperts is going to decrease. The most we can hope for is increasingly discerning audiences who are more desirous of education than entertainment.


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