

Guest Editorial *Instant Gratification . . . Not So Fast*

I recently had a very interesting conversation with a wonderful human being. Here is the story. I requested information about tooth whitening products and treatment methods from a well-known “cosmetic” dentistry company. The regional sales manager met with me and gave me much information about all of the products they offered. He really seemed to know his product line. He had a well-scripted presentation—intending, of course, to motivate me to purchase their whitening products for my patients. He even guaranteed patients could see an eight-shade change on the Vita scale after whitening.

We talked about several different treatment approaches. During our conversation, he mentioned that he had had his maxillary incisors restored since he was not happy with his overlapped natural teeth. I asked him about one of his teeth, which had a porcelain veneer with a very dark shadow that I could see from 5 feet away as we talked. He said it was dark due to “microleakage.” He knew it needed to be replaced and might be decaying.

He told me that he wanted to go where his company trains dentists in esthetic procedures, and that he would have an instructor do his restorations. He then went on to say that he was apprehensive about having the procedure done. He said he knew their philosophy included complete smile “makeovers,” and he was very concerned about preparing healthy teeth just to improve esthetics.

He hoped they would advise him if it would not look right to “just redo” the previously restored incisors. He thought they probably would insist that he have his canines and possibly even premolars restored. I saw that he had a slight space at the mesial incisal aspect of his maxillary left canine. He said that a veneer had been advised. He also said he has negative spaces where his premolars were not in the proper alignment in the buccal corridor.

This regional sales manager seemed to squirm when I gently asked him about his darkened tooth, which was esthetically restored, but relaxed when I shared my philosophy on conservative care. I asked if he knew about other options such as orthodontics or bonding (or no treatment) of his maxillary left canine with a very slight space. (Remember, this was a “virgin” tooth.)

He said he was not a dentist and did not know all the consequences of restoring his virgin teeth. I told him many of my patients had expressed the desire to keep as much of their natural smile intact as possible. He seemed very relieved. It was as though he had never heard of this approach for a smile makeover. Other than four incisors that were restored (poorly, in my opinion), this regional sales manager had a very vigorous, handsome natural smile. It seems that I was the first person to even share this with him.

I hope he will reflect on our conversation and seek other opinions about restoring his smile. His situation represents one of my major concerns about dentistry. I believe we have created dilemmas in dentistry with overpreparing, overselling, and overmarketing “cosmetic” and “esthetic” procedures.

Many dentists bristle at words I heard many times from this gentleman—words like “profit centers,” “marketing,” and “customers.” He had bought into the often-repeated idea that patients want instant gratification. Perhaps his own mouth, which now needs to be re-restored, was a profit center for a highly marketed dentist seeking customers who were unhappy with their smiles and wanted a transformation.

I left the sales manager with a final thought to ponder. Perhaps there are reasons other than instant gratification why people are willing to undergo drastic measures to improve their body image. Maybe people are seeking optimal health and get sold the myth of body perfection by our culture. There are many people who have health concerns that can be better addressed through means that are not instant and not purely cosmetic.

Our culture has created many anorexics and bulimics starving for a certain body image. Perhaps this is not the best approach. It seems we must look for contentment with our body images before things change. Clearly, this doesn’t mean a smile can’t be improved, but we must surely count the costs (and this means more than financial costs).

It’s obvious this sales manager has serious concerns with what cosmetic dentists have recommended for his smile. Perhaps he is delaying treatment because he’s caught in his own dilemma. He works for a company that promotes smile makeovers, but he probably believes they are overtreating. It must be difficult to sell instant gratification and cosmetic dentistry when your own mouth is a double standard. I believe this man knows too much about “instant gratification,” if the truth be told.

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