

Whither Dental Practice?

We are living in dichotomous times. On the one hand, some dentists are decrying the lack of "busyness," which they attribute to the economic downturn, the decrease in caries incidence, patient skepticism toward doctors, the decrease in the doctor-patient ratio, and, in general, the public's apathy about dental health. On the other hand, a number of dentists are extremely busy but are feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the daily decisions to be made—administrative, technical, financial, professional, and societal. Where should they look for answers? To whom should they turn for help? These are anxious times as there appear to be no solutions.

In 1992, President George Bush awarded the National Medal of Technology to Dr. J. M. Juran, Chairman Emeritus of the Juran Institute. He received the medal in recognition of "his lifetime work of providing the key principles and methods by which enterprises manage the quality of their products and processes." We may well ask ourselves if a dentist would ever receive such regard for the quality and processes of his or her work, practice, and teaching, given the temper of our times. Dentists are finding it more and more difficult to survive financially and emotionally in the current environment if they insist on ideal comprehensive treatment carried out in a professional atmosphere. The following items from the recent media illustrate this.

"Practicing Medicine (Dentistry)—or Business?" (Headline). "Health care changes pressure physicians (dentists). As the health care picture constantly changes, doctors, once able to be independent practitioners in control of their destiny, are finding their futures less secure. It is conceivable that you could be a very capable physician (dentist) and not have any patients." (*Boston Globe*, December 12, 1993.)

Transposing ideas from an article by James Fallows on politics and the economy in the *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1993, dentists have (subliminally) relied on several great Western ideas based on the theories of three men: Sir Isaac Newton, the father of modern science, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the father of liberal political theory, and Adam Smith, the father of laissez-faire economics. Most dentists believe in scientific findings and progress, believe in the paramount dignity of the individual, and believe in the free market system. If, theoretically, one studies dental science and, subsequently, practices with techniques based on solid evidence, if one respects each patient as an individual who deserves the best the profession has to offer and is respected in return, and if one carries out one's professional obligations responsibly, one should succeed in a free-market economy.

Is this true any longer? Are the pressures of the economy (the recession, high overhead, the government (OSHA), the law (litigation), and the insurance industry (mandated treatment plans and fees) destroying the very fabric of the scientific, independent, free market basis on which dentists have founded their careers for many years?

It is time for a national debate on where practices are heading. Will there be only a small number of elite dental boutiques catering to a tiny percentage of the population who want the benefit of the best of dentistry's great accomplishments? Will all other dentists practice with mediocrity, conforming to the dictates of denigrating societal forces? What will happen to the great middle class of dentists who want to practice ideally but who are being forced to compromise?

Let us start talking to each other and to anyone who will listen now. It is already getting late!

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