

Editorial Tribute to Morton Amsterdam*

Morton Amsterdam passed away at the age of 92 on June 27, 2014. The essence of the life of a very famous person is usually opaque to most outsiders. I had the rare opportunity to share so many important events over the past five decades with Morton, that I feel I have the license to say a few personal words about him.

I fully remember his accomplishments and the honor he brought to his beloved profession. Gifted with an uncanny clinical acumen, extraordinary manual skills, and a professorial historical perspective, he was able to roam through the past 70 years and truly become a national dental treasure! Morton Amsterdam was a passionate and very compassionate dentist-extraordinaire, seemingly cast from a bygone era. Nelson Mandela implored us to touch the lives of others. What a wonderful feeling it was to be in Mort's presence—making us feel we were the most important person in his life at that moment.

It was always fascinating to listen to his former students describe their role in dentistry. They'd say, "I'm a prosthodontist," or "I am a periodontal prosthodontist," or "I'm a periodontist." When asked the same question, Mort would proudly state that he was a "general dentist." And, believe me, he was mightily proud of this because, in his mind, the general dentist had the highest calling in clinical practice, for it was he or she who was on the front line in the recognition, prevention, and early treatment of dental diseases.

Worldwide, Mort was known as the father of Periodontal Prosthesis. But permit me to tell you a little about this "general dentist": He was honored by the American Academy of Periodontology (Master Clinician Award), the Greater New York Academy of Prosthodontics (1984 Schweitzer Award), the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry, the University of Pennsylvania, Alpha Omega (Gold Medal/Achievement Award), Sweden, Israel, Japan, Great Britain, Brazil, France, Greece, Tunisia and Romania . . . and the list goes on and on. This "general dentist" formed and chaired the first Department of Endodontics at Temple University and was a Director of the Postdoctoral Programs in Periodontics and Periodontal Prosthesis at the University of Pennsylvania. I should mention he had no formal postdoctoral training in endodontics, prosthodontics, or periodontics—or in any dental specialty. The postdoctoral periodontics clinic at Penn Dental Medicine carries his name (along with D. Walter Cohen), as does the Morton Amsterdam Deanship.

Having worked with him for so long and so closely, I came to realize that the essence of his genius was nothing more than a profound understanding of certain

fundamental morphological and biological principles confirmed by well-documented clinical experiences. He constantly harped on the theme: "Go back to the basics and you'll find the answer!"

His innovations and contributions are quite formidable. To name a few:

- He was instrumental in developing a unique series of diamond burs for tooth preparation.
- Early on he recognized the impact of trauma from occlusion on the progression of periodontal disease, long before the classic studies of the 1970-'80s proved him correct. In a very real sense he helped instigate the epic transition in our way of thinking about periodontics.
- He developed a proven working method for defining and creating a therapeutic occlusion, applicable to both traditional and implant dentistry.
- His observations on the development of peri-implantitis after implant loading proved to be prescient.
- His work on hemi-sections, provisional restorations, and adjunctive orthodontics including forced and passive eruption, goes back almost a half a century and are pretty much standard fare today. And his classic paper "Periodontal Prosthesis—Twenty-five Years in Retrospect," published in 1974, is a must-read for all students of dentistry.

Mort's presence inspired generations of students to champion the belief that they were more than just dentists, but citizens of the world and with that came the responsibility "to give back." He served as a moral compass for all of his students and was a ready source of guidance whenever we felt lost.

On a very personal note, he was unfailingly kind in steering me in the right direction early in my career. More than likely, without his encouragement and advice, I would have never gone into teaching. Great teachers allow their students to discover all they can be—surely in my case, he proved to be an extraordinary inspiration!

Practicing with him for more than three decades was a great joy and privilege for me. I owe him an awesome debt, one I can never repay . . . It has been said that to share one's knowledge is a way to achieve immortality. Mort, you so deservedly have achieved immortality. Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.

Arnold Weisgold
July 2014

*Originally published in the GNYAP News, Fall 2014. Reprinted with permission.