

## The Dentist in Society

### Part 1: Who are we?

Upcoming editorials will be dedicated to observational comments in which personal reflections will be used to describe who dentists are as a group, the common characteristics we display, and the patterns of behavior that can be attributed to us collectively. Admittedly, these observations are problematic to begin with because there is no science behind them and they are based on the assumption that we are a relatively homogeneous group. Very few statements, if any, will be made regarding dentistry *per se*; I will focus on the practitioners of this profession. Comments of a personal nature may irritate open nerve endings, evoking emotional responses; do not hold back, my email address is posted at the end of these editorials for a reason.

In terms of social status and background, it is my opinion that we are a very homogeneous group. We can be roughly divided into 2 subgroups: the first accounting for the vast majority—let's assume 95% to 97%—and the other a small minority of up to 5%. The smaller group is made up of children of dentists (or other healthcare/academic professionals who may have intimate knowledge or interaction with the profession), those who grew up immersed in the profession and saw it as a natural career choice. Some are children of other unrelated professionals. But where do the rest of the 95% come from and why did we choose to become dentists? In my opinion, the lion's share of us come from a lower middle class socioeconomic background—the kids of blue-collar families. Like most kids, we did not grow up with the vision of dedicating our life to the betterment of the human craniofacial complex (aka fixing teeth). This career choice, to young talented and ambitious people, represented a significant improvement over our current situation in life.

This viewpoint may evoke resentment given its implication that we are “new money” (new rich, *nouveau riche* in French)—“persons who acquire wealth within their generation”—according to Wikipedia, “a term sometimes used in a derogatory fashion, for the purposes of social class distinction, to describe persons who are viewed as lacking the experience, finesse, or taste to use newfound wealth in the same manner as old money—persons from families who have been wealthy for multiple generations.” Rest assured, almost all dentists are outside the definition of rich; however, if it is of concern to you, bear in mind that if new money implies you are lacking finesse or taste, you can be assured that the grandfather of an old-money person suffered the same social handicaps.

In western societies, lower middle class persons tend to cluster together; your father may have been a salesperson, an electrician, or a steel worker, but the income level and lifestyle are very similar and, as a kid, you are surrounded by persons of the same ilk. The individuals you interact with on a routine basis are also

of the same background: police officers, firefighters, shoemakers are all lower middle class. The few with whom you interacted who were better off were individuals such as

your dentist—the guy who wore a white coat, was addressed as *Doctor*, and seemed to be well off financially. Ah, here is something that represents a significant improvement socially and financially, something worthy of your aspirations. Interestingly enough, it is only after one becomes a dentist that one realizes this is still manual labor—you get paid only for what you produce—and puff goes the notion of money for nothing.

Many dentists are the pride of their families and remain loyal to their roots and upbringing. Many choose to live in middle-class neighborhoods so their children can experience the same strong, warm, close family units; people who value hard work; and a friendly atmosphere that never shuns a stranger, where everyone is always welcomed.

I can use euphemisms to describe my late father's occupation and state that he was an executive transportation specialist, but the reality is that he was a bus driver—an honest, hardworking individual, a man of very few words who worked 6 days a week taking double shifts to provide for his family. I vividly remember the humming sound of the old diesel engine outside our apartment building when he was picked up at 4 am, returning every night at 11 pm, smoking the last cigarette of the day and falling asleep. He did so day in and day out, year round, and died in misery from cancer at the age of 48.

I take great pride in the values stood for by my family, neighbors, and friends. Over the years I have had the opportunity to treat and get to know quite a few individuals who fit the definition of old money; never did I feel inclined to reinvent my personal history. One should never fear being patronized or snubbed by a colleague; how can the milkman's son be better than you? I feel sorry for the few who find it hard to come to terms with who they are; nothing is more empowering than knowing you have rightfully earned everything you have.

Next month I will discuss the ways we manage finance, property, and practices. It may not be palatable to everyone, but is guaranteed to be interesting.



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