

Editorial

Need before greed

Overheard recently: "I can't do that because the fees aren't high enough." It stuck in my craw.

Why don't some people have the "time" to offer their patients certain procedures or options that may be considerably less profitable than other options? Health care practitioners have an obligation to patients that extends far beyond simply viewing patients as a source of a comfortable income. The colleague who expressed the above sentiment is, in my opinion, guilty of a callous and unethical approach to patient treatment. When it occurs with regularity, such an approach means that patients are only being offered certain types of treatment on the basis of profit. With the extensive changes in health care delivery that are ahead for the United States and many other countries as they approach the next century, the dental profession risks alienation of the public as a result of the inability of some to separate responsibility from greed.

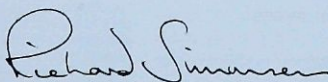
Certainly the private practice of dentistry has to be viewed as a business—without a positive operating income the doors to a practice would have to be closed. I am not arguing for massive free treatment by private practitioners for those who cannot afford treatment. It is quite clear that some system of treatment for those who cannot support themselves needs to be put in place, but treatment options for those patients should not be restricted on the basis of how much profit they provide for the dentist. There are enough procedures that provide more than the average amount of remuneration for most practitioners to be able to make a very comfortable living. Thus, in the options offered patients, some treatment options of a lower paycheck should be included without the provider feeling that he or she is doing charity work. The license to practice as a health care professional is a privilege granted by society—it is not a right that allows those so licensed to decide for their patients that certain treatments will not be offered because they do not provide enough profit.

We are in an age of business increasingly paying attention to the wishes of customers and, rightly so, this will spread to an increased attention being paid to the wishes and the knowledge of patients ("customers"). The practitioner who views his or her patients as an income source to be treated as expeditiously as possible

for as high a fee as possible will not survive long. Failing to offer a patient a particular service because it does not bring in the desired hourly return on treatment time will lead to loss of patients to the offices of colleagues (who are, after all, competitors) who choose to offer treatment that is in the best interests of the patient. Dental offices may well be ranked not only on treatment outcomes in the future, but also on treatment options offered. Patients are becoming more interested and self-educated about health care. They will not tolerate a health care professional treating them or their children if the treating professional cannot offer a reasonable scientific explanation as to why a particular treatment is not offered.

How the public views the profession of dentistry is crucial to many decisions that will be made in this era of change—in particular for changes in the delivery of dental care. If the profession is viewed as self-serving and greedy, the changes imposed on the profession will be significantly more severe. If the profession is viewed, as it should be, as made up of a group of professionals with public service as a primary constituent of their objectives, as a group of professionals who enjoy helping others, then the profession will have far greater input into future developments in health care delivery for dentistry.

The statement, and more importantly the attitude behind such a statement, such as "I can't do that (for example, preventive pit and fissure sealants or small bonded, more time-consuming, restorations rather than conventional amalgam restorations) because the fees aren't high enough," is simply unacceptable. Those who think this way should probe their consciences, examine their standard of living compared to the vast majority of people in this world, and put need before greed.



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