



In Practice

WITH DR. RONALD E. GOLDSTEIN

They're Not Making Patients Like They Used To

When I first went into dentistry some 45 years ago, I was impressed with the fact that so many of my father's patients had been coming to him for almost 30 years. Despite fee increases and numerous new dentists coming into the Atlanta area, they stayed. They stayed because they assumed my father was providing the best possible service (and he was).

Those days are over, and although you might have the type of practice where most of your patients stay for many years, the fact is that the average patient today is more fickle than he/she used to be. Old-fashioned patient loyalty is gone.

WHAT HAPPENED TO PATIENT LOYALTY?

Patients of yesteryear were so loyal that they were not tempted with a new dentist, new equipment, or even lower fees. There may be a few loyal patients still out there today, but most of them have gone by the wayside.



Atlanta attorney Emory Schwall (right) pictured here with Dr. Ronald Goldstein, is an exception to the rule, and has been a patient in Dr. Goldstein's practice for more than 35 years.

So I began to wonder, is this just a sign of the times? Is it something our profession is doing? These are the same questions I'm asked while I lecture throughout the world.

MEDIA INFLUENCE

What is different now is the tremendous amount of media coverage of virtually every new technique and material in dentistry. Products used to be researched and proven effective before the press ran with the story. New materials now enter the market before any university research has even begun, according to Dr. Harald Heymann. Heymann made this statement at the 25th annual Marvin C. Goldstein lectureship at the Medical College of Georgia on April 25, 2003 [QA: Edit okay?].

As shocking as that may be, it is a reality that materials and techniques are hyped in the press as never before. So much so, that patients now assume that success is a *fete complete* and that any newly advertised technique or material is just what they needed. If their dentist doesn't have the new "thing," it is an indication to the patient they should switch to another dentist who does—even if they have been going to another dentist for more than 10 years.

ADVERTISING PLAYS A ROLE

With all the attention in the last decade to advertising, it is no wonder that patients tend to



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become tempted to visit a dentist down the street who may be catering to some of their fears—touting the newest technique or promising unbelievable results. What this means to our profession is that we must do a much better job in patient retention. Staffs, as well as dentists, need to:

- Communicate more effectively.
- Let our patients know that we are up-to-date, we consider all new techniques, and although we may not adopt all of them, the most appropriate ones for our practice and our patients are being used.
- Let our patients know that large advertisements do not necessarily mean they are the best dentists.

We must remain current in our patient care techniques, and also focus on patient retention.

I remember a patient telling me she wanted to have her four front teeth "capped" and asked for my recommendation of the best dentist in Atlanta who did this procedure. Obviously our office had not been doing a good job in educating our own patients

about what types of services we perform. When she found out about some of the advances I had been doing in esthetic dentistry, she was a little embarrassed—but without reason. It was our fault for not doing a better job of patient education.

Another thing about our profession: most dentists are highly ethical, they do not brag, and they shy away from realistically communicating their abilities, interests, and expertise. We should make an effort to keep our patients informed. If you want to use a newsletter, (as Arlen D. Lackey, DDS of Pacific Grove, California, does so well), fine. Information available in the reception area is another method of communicating to patients—this could be through playing videos or providing a binder containing before-and-after photos.

Many years ago we had an excellent associate dentist working with us, who simply was so much of an introvert that he could not talk to patients. Rarely, if ever, did he speak about himself. So we employed a dental assistant who had excellent com-

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munication skills to work with him, and she was the one who “sold” the patients on staying

with the dentist. She was wonderful, and until that associate passed away, he had an excellent reten-

tion ratio because his patients really loved him. In the final analysis, “love” is what a great deal of patient retention is all about. When patients like you as a person, they tend to care a little less about your ability. Not that ability isn’t the most important factor, but a caring manner and personal service are also impor-

tant factors. In the final analysis, it may make the difference.

THE SUPERMARKET INFLUENCE

Today patients are so used to doing comparison-shopping, that they are accustomed to finding any type of bargains [QA: Edit okay?]. And that does not exclude healthcare. There are many patients who look for the “special” and simply cannot evaluate quality with price. They see a price tag and assume the quality is standard. They assume that whatever vision they have for success, it will be met—only to find that their vision was just a “vision” and not reality [QA: Edit okay?]. I’ve seen many of these people who were poorly influenced and wished they had seen a copy of my book, *Change Your Smile*, before they ventured out into the discount world of bargain dentistry. Reading even a chapter in the area of which esthetic improvement they were seeking, would have given them some knowledge about what to ask, what to seek, and how to evaluate quality treatment. What seemed to be a bargain became a nightmare for many individuals who failed to see the difference in healthcare standards and artistry of fine esthetic dentistry.

NAME BRAND SHOPPING... PERCEPTION VS REALITY

Comparison-shopping is easy when you are shopping for a name brand. You are looking for the best price on identical products, but patients compare esthetic dentistry in the same way. The fee is only one of several variables. The perception that dentistry is similar to brand name shopping—buying the same product at a discount store for a lower price and getting the same quality at a leading department store—is “reality” among many patients. These patients are influenced by marketing and may switch because of the effectiveness of some advertisements.

They may read an article about porcelain laminate veneers and feel that the veneer itself is a standard product that any dentist

can apply, so they shop around and go to the dentist that has the lowest price.

The media doesn't help. Unfortunately most magazine articles do a disservice by quoting a single price. They may quote the most common fee given by the dentist who furnishes information to a magazine's writer, but rarely does it represent an accurate measurement of experience, skill, artistry, laboratory work, time, patient history, expectation, as well as demand, and other requirements that go into whatever fee is presented. Again, patients get inaccurate or incomplete information.

The truth is we have become a world of inaccurate information mixed in with some of the facts. It is virtually impossible for a patient to see the difference. That is why I have tried to present a realistic range of fees in *Change Your Smile*. The fee range is significant, because there are diverse factors that need to be taken into account before calculating or presenting a fee to any multi-procedure patient.

THE INSURANCE FACTOR

Certainly one of the biggest contributors to misinformation regarding fees has been the insurance industry with their classification of UCR [QA: **What does this stand for?**], which has done a real disservice to dentistry.

Our job is to educate our patients (and the rest of the profession) that there is a difference in quality, and there is a difference in price. In esthetic dentistry (as in most things), you pay for what you get. This is a reflection, not only of the quality, the artistry, and the ability of a health professional to spend the time to understand what the patients wants, and then to have the technical and artistic skills to be able to deliver it. That will never occur in "bargain basement dentistry." Quality and artistry will always be at a premium, and we need to find more patients who appreciate this by truth in advertising and truth expounded by our health professional organizations (eg, American Dental Association, Academy of

General Dentistry, American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry, etc).

It may be a dream, but it's a dream that I hope to see during my lifetime. It could certainly help bring loyalty back into the profession. ○

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