

Love Is a Two-Way Street

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Previously in this column, in this very month, we have commented on some of the events that occur in February: National Children's Dental Health Month, Black History Month, and Give Kids a Smile. Yet, the most popular day in February, the 14th, has remained largely ignored in dental literature. Sure, there is widespread cynicism about the commercial emphasis placed on Valentine's Day; but at its heart, Valentine's Day really is just a celebration of love. They are fortunate who share love with others, whether it be a spouse, significant other, parents, children, or pets. Our chosen profession is also deserving of love, and since so many of us truly love dentistry, it seems only natural to reflect on this fact, in this month.

For those dentists who don't love their profession, I feel sorry and a bit confused. Sorry because everyone should love what they do for a living. Confused because I do not understand why anyone would pursue a career they did not love in the first place. Life is too short, and our time on earth too precious, to be in a career we do not love.

Love has been described as many things: a red rose, a many-splendored thing, a battlefield (thank you, Pat Benatar), but when we see love as a two-way street, we get our most insightful glimpse at how it can best be grown over time. Once, I asked my wife's grandmother how she and her husband stayed happily married for more than 60 years. Her reply was, "A lot of give and take, and usually more giving than taking." Similarly, someone once quipped, "Love is stuff that does not abide by the laws of physics. The more you give away, the more you have." And so it is with dentistry as well.



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There are many things dentistry has to offer us. We can earn a good income that affords us a great deal of comfort and security. As members of one of the most highly respected professions, we are often looked up to as contributors and leaders within our communities. Dentistry offers us the personal satisfaction that comes from providing a service to people that enhances their quality of life. We remain one of the few health care professionals who are able to own their own practice and run it as a viable business. This in turn affords us a high level of freedom in choosing the way we practice, the people we work with, the type of patients we see, and the number of hours and days we work. Part scientific-based logic and part artistic creativity, dentistry can truly satisfy both the right and left sides of our brains simultaneously. Anticipated high demand for our services means we will likely have work as long as we want it. The breadth in scope of our profession and the difficulty in mastering its skills all but guarantee we cannot grow bored with our chosen career. High technology permeates dentistry, and there is a certain joy and pride from being the instruments through which this technology benefits the population's health.

For all that dentistry has to offer, what can we give back to our profession

in return? There are three general ways in which all dentists should consider giving. The first is the gift of time and service. Examples of this would be donating dental services to the underserved either at one's office or an off-site facility or clinic. Another would be volunteer teaching. Some may prefer to serve on the faculty at one of our dental schools. Others may opt for volunteering as a mentor to a dental student or young dentist. Another avenue for donating time and service is through volunteering in organized dentistry. Some generous individuals, of course, manage to do all of these or find other ways to serve.

The second way to give to the profession of dentistry is by giving money or other tangible donations like equipment. Our profession has too many causes worthy of our monetary gifts to name here. But I will take the privilege of mentioning a few that are particularly deserving. The first is called Dental Education: Our Legacy — Our Future. This cause seeks to address the worsening crisis in dental education by funding the hiring of qualified faculty, alleviating skyrocketing student loan debt and upgrading outdated and deteriorating facilities and equipment. If for no other reason, consider giving to this project to honor

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the individual who conceptualized it. Dr. Art Dugoni will surely go down in history as one of the great contributors to, among other things, modern dental education. Give to one of our tripartite's foundations to directly help improve the oral health of the public on a grand scale through their many individual causes. Donations are, of course, welcome at our association's political action committees. Your dollars will be spent to fight for the best possible legislative outcomes and to forge relationships with our elected officials that will profoundly affect oral health care and the practice of dentistry. Finally, before disposing of your old dental chair, remember there are many clinical settings worldwide that would be glad to accept donations of equipment and supplies. Seek them first before adding more to our landfills.

The third way to give to our profession is through respect. Respect for dentistry is a gift we all should give and it costs nothing. It comes through caring enough about our professional legacy to practice in an ethical manner, treat patients, staff and colleagues with fairness and dignity, and eschew the philosophy that the most important end is the last line of your tax return, and any means needed to inflate it are justified. Respect for dentistry is demonstrated by the choices we make in our character and the direction we set our moral compasses.

While February is an appropriate time to reflect on our love of dentistry, like all relationships, it requires ongoing effort. What a shame it would be to let a love this good slip away. At the end of a life well lived, marked by those gifts we have both received from and given to our profession, we should be able to reflect on dentistry and feel something akin to Shakespeare's sentiment when he penned these words: "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings, that then I scorn to change my state with kings." ■■■■

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