



# In the Beginning ...

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**ABSTRACT** Dentists have a number of important practice management decisions to make at the beginning of their careers. These are often made without a lot of training in the business side of dental practice. They include knowledge of what to say to get offered the right job and what to ask to choose the best position. New dentists need to look inward first and be proactive next to land the best position possible.

## GUEST EDITOR

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**A**s a lecturer on practice management to dental students for the last 21 years, I've come to accept the fact that it's impossible to get the majority of students to absorb the subject effectively. There is just too much immediate learning necessary to keep patients alive in the school dental clinic to worry about future issues when and if there is a graduation day.

After graduation, all of the practice management information glossed over during school becomes extremely important. The No. 1 complaint of recent graduates is: "Why didn't you teach us more about practice management?" The saddest part of this statement is that many new dentists make poor business choices of lifelong importance at this stage of their careers because they are not well versed in the value of good decisions.

Let's look at a few of the decisions that, if made correctly, can tremendously improve the quickness of success and the quality of practice throughout the life of the business.

First, every practice is different and every practitioner is peculiar in his/her own way.<sup>1</sup> As a new dentist, it's vitally important to make the decision to look inward to create a personal baseline upon which to build all the rest of the decisions about

practice. A "vision" of what the dentist sees as their future practice, their lifestyle, the type of dentistry they want to perform, the patients they prefer to treat are all important beginning issues to clarify.

Questions a new dentist might ask are:

- Do I prefer to work alone or surrounded by colleagues?

- What aspects of dentistry fascinate me and which do I prefer to avoid?

- How good am I at managing other people?

- Am I a Mr. Fix-it or prefer the phone book to solve problems?

- How does family life/hobby/vacation play into my life plans?

- What are my basic income needs and short- and long-term plans based on my income?

- How do I define the standard of care that I choose to provide to my patients for the rest of my career?

The better the new dentist knows himself or herself and becomes comfortable with who he or she is and what is important to them, the better they'll be able to choose the right associateship, evaluate the pluses and minuses of practices to get close to, and purchase a practice that comes close to their ideal practice model.

Secondly, how a dentist decides what is the right associateship for him or her gives them the opportunity to expand their

skills. Too often the new dentist looks at the associateship position as a nurturing one with an experienced, devoted, quality dentist while the senior dentist looks at an associate as an opportunity to play more golf. Too often the new dentist's decisions about where to practice are based more on the pressure of finding a "job," and the reality of paying back student loans, and the fear of losing out to other recent graduates than on the vision he or she has for a career. This rationale often results in a disappointing experience as an associate and frustration with the profession.

For a meaningful associateship, the new dentist needs to make the decision to slowly and methodically evaluate the opportunities available. If none seem suitable at the beginning, the new dentist needs to imitate the business community in general and open more doors.

When senior dental students at a Contra Costa Dental Society meeting asked new member Dr. Donna Gumber how she located a position of her choosing, she said, "I just went door to door." Many senior dentists know they should be thinking about an associate but they don't want to rock the boat or are good at procrastinating. If they get the chance to sit down with a positive and motivated new dentist, this can often move them to take the first step toward a possible transition.

When attempting to open some doors, the new dentist must first create an opportunity to meet practicing dentists. An effective tool involves writing a letter of introduction with a resume attached, which describes all the ways the new dentist can improve the existing practice. For dentists returning from the military or finishing a residency, the list can be extensive because issues like speed and the variety of treatments they are capable and confident of performing add immediate value. But new graduates also have things to offer:

## A Sample Letter

Dear Dr. Jones,

**I will be graduating this June from dental school and am very interested in finding an associate position in your area. I have a variety of skills that may be of value to the right practice. I'm very comfortable working with children. I have had special training in minor periodontal procedures like crown lengthening. I understand the importance of helping build a practice and would be eager to join organizations in the community to draw new patients into the practice. I enjoy emergency dentistry and would be pleased to carry the majority of after-hours emergencies. And as a new dentist, I would look forward to learning about all aspects of running a successful dental practice.**

**I'll be calling in the next few weeks and would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you even if you are not currently considering adding an associate. Your insight into the area would prove invaluable to me.**

Sincerely,  
Michael Lane  
Senior Dental Student

- I can take calls 24/7.
- I love to treat children.
- I can perform crown lengthening.
- I'm proficient in a number of endodontic procedures.
- I am looking forward to learning from a master.
- I want to get out in the community and take advantage of my connections to attract more patients.

The list takes some imagination, but the important overall theme should be what the new dentist can offer the practice that will add value to the office and possibly gain a position. The letter should be finished with a promise that the office will receive a call from the potential associate to set up an interview with the dentist about opportunities in the area even if the dentist is currently not looking for an associate (they call it an informational interview in the business world) with the outside chance an interview will turn into the right job. (SEE SAMPLE LETTER.)

Working with the local dental society, send the letter and a resume to all the dentists in the chosen geographical location who are in the age bracket most likely to be considering

bringing on an associate (20 to 30 years in practice). Try to keep the geographical location small enough to be able to meet with the dentists in the area.

If, as a result of the letter and phone calls, the new dentist gains the opportunity to interview with a potential employer, he or she needs to have a clear picture of what the practice needs to offer them. Based on a clear understanding of their needs, the new dentist must evaluate and answer questions like:<sup>2</sup>

- Is the patient mix suitable for improving my skills in a wide variety of treatments?
- Is the facility and equipment conducive to quality care?
- Is the staff professional and willing to work with me to guarantee quality care?
- Is reimbursement equivalent to comparable offices?<sup>3</sup>
- Is the senior dentist committed to improving and broadening my skills?
- Will the practice supply me with enough patients and motivate them to allow me to treat them?
- Will working in this practice add knowledge about patients and location to assist in purchasing a practice at a later date?

Obviously opening doors is an

important part of finding that first job, but taking a position in the right office is what will spell the difference between an opportunity to grow and improve as a dentist and a period of stagnation and frustration.

In dental schools accredited by the American Dental Association, the worst graduate is fully capable of providing quality care to patients. And each graduate knows the ethical standards by which they should treat their patients. They know to treat every patient as though they are receiving the treatment themselves. Why some choose

not to is often a result of poor business choices made in the beginning of practice. A practice that is having trouble making ends meet offers the practitioner the temptation to cut corners or in other ways alter ethical standards to improve the bottom line.

By setting a good base of intelligent and thoughtful decisions at the beginning of a dental career, the new dentist can avoid ever having to face the temptation to give up the professional standards that brought him or her into the profession in the first place and can be proud of a lifetime of helping patients. ■■■■

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