

The Power of Choice

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An elementary school cafeteria in rural Iowa seems an unlikely place to start a movement that will determine the future of our nation and the world. Yet on Jan. 3, it wasn't unlikely at all.

While the rest of the country was still shaking off their New Year's hangovers, Iowans set about the business of electing the next president. I know a few Iowans and they don't seem ones to grandstand. But surely they must relish their moment on the world stage as the choices they make are watched, scrutinized, and possibly copied by the rest of the country. That a small group of Iowans has such an important role in shaping the future of the United States is testament to the fact that choice is one of the most powerful gifts in the world.

This is particularly true to us, as dentists; in our professional and in our personal lives. Dentistry's legacy, our professional success, and our personal happiness rise and fall based on the choices we all make, day in and day out. We should regularly examine how our choices affect both of these areas of our lives so we can make the right ones.

Every generation of dentists is forced to confront issues by which the public holds the profession up to the light of scrutiny. For roughly the past decade or two, our profession has been besieged by those practitioners who place their own personal financial gain, motives, and egos above the health and well-being of their patients. They seek to use the veil of providing cosmetic services to justify a practice that in many cases leaves patients in worse dental health, not better. Every day, healthy teeth are irreversibly prepared (or "mutilated" as some would say) to place crowns or veneers on them. As a result, patients' pulpal, periodontal, and temporomandibular joint health are



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too often sacrificed. Practices such as these are what caused public respect of the dental profession to decline also during the last decade or two. Is this coincidental?

Sadly, this is the result of choices made by individual dentists everywhere. When faced with the choice to provide patients with services that will enhance their health or to sell them a bill of cosmetic goods that pad the dentists' pockets, which will we choose? We can make the choice to practice by our code of ethics and by the principle of "do no harm," or we can choose to ignore these tenets to serve our own selfish ends. We have the power of choice and those choices will either enhance the status of the profession or cause it to continue its downward slide in the poll of public opinion.

The number of dissatisfied dentists appears to be growing. These individuals may be unhappy in their personal or professional lives, or both. Some experts have identified a window in a practitioner's career when burnout is common, 10 to 15 years out of dental school is the time frame I've been told. What choices have our colleagues made during those first 10 to 15 years that brings them to the point of such personal dissatisfaction? Beyond the dental office, we too often see the physical and emotional toll that stress takes. Physical illnesses and injuries are often linked to lifestyle choices we make. What we eat, how much, and what type

of exercise we do, our level of drug and alcohol use, and how much and in what environment we work all play critical roles in our health and happiness.

Perhaps as important is the toll that psychological pathology has on us, especially as we age. For example, depression is largely undertreated in our society. This is unfortunate because it is often readily treatable with either talk therapy, medication, or a combination of the two. And, not surprisingly, much of our personal happiness is by choice, as well. University of California, Los Angeles' Joel Adelman, an expert in individual and family psychotherapy says that at some point in a person's life, he or she makes a choice; and that choice is between wisdom or despair. Isn't it refreshing and inspiring when we meet individuals in their 80s and 90s who are outwardly happy, optimistic, and excited about life? It makes us want to learn their secret. Perhaps it is simply a choice that they made.

At its simplest, life is a series of choices we as individuals make. As dentists we are afforded great opportunity to achieve happiness and fulfillment and to make a difference in the lives of others through our profession. Our hope as a profession is that individuals understand the power of choice and make those that best help themselves and the public we serve. ■■■■

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