

The New Reality

Dentistry has come a long way from its beginnings. We are immersed in issues such as access, an emphasis on prevention, and a marvelous array of new technologies to utilize in the treatment of patients. For this reason, it is sometimes hard to realize how far the profession has come in erasing from memory those parts of our history that graphically associated pain and discomfort with a trip to the dentist.

However, while uncomfortable states of oral health still exist and are responsible for bringing some patients to the dental office only out of necessity, they no longer predominate the attitude of what dentistry is, or can be to the average person. Let us explain.

In earlier times, dentists were frequently depicted in art as purveyors of pain and suffering, contributing to a less than savory reputation. Sometimes, dentists have also been the target of humorous parodies in film, perhaps less damaging to the psyche, but nonetheless disturbing to the consummate professional.

We recall a caricature in Malvin Ring's excellent volume, *Dentistry: An Illustrated History*, which depicts one of our professional predecessors in a superior position to a seated patient with mouth stretched wide open. The dentist has one foot on the patient's chest; the other balanced on the seat of the four-legged chair as he is aggressively leveraging a forceps or a primitive instrument around a tooth. A nearby female patient-in-waiting appears to be holding her swollen jaw, either out of personal discomfort, or out of sympathy for the unfortunate soul in the chair. A contemporary viewer of this well-drawn artistic rendering might express great sympathy for the "victim" and

would-be victim and considerable dislike for this dentist who also has a somewhat evil facial expression.

Another portrait in sepia tones in Ring's text shows one of our professional predecessors with his hand extended inside a wide-stretched mouth. The picture has a banner-like caption at the bottom proclaiming, "The Tooth Ache or Torment and Torture." This caption ably characterizes the attitude that many in society probably harbored toward our predecessors. We believe such depictions of the dentist were probably the rule rather than the exception in earlier times.

Periodically, Hollywood has done its part to present profiles of our profession that among a wide variety of possibilities may have provided comic relief or conveyed evil intent. Many of us have discussed these assaults on the dentist from time to time, wondering why our profession, seemingly more often than others, has been forced to bear the brunt of less than flattering characterizations, either of the profession itself or of the idiosyncrasies of individual professionals. Perhaps in contemporary times it has been of some consolation that the attorney has been increasingly replacing the dentist at the center of societal humor.

In this space from time to time, we have discussed the image of the profession. Image deals with respect and reputation achieved by the profession and its contributions to society. What we are talking about here is somewhat different. It is more about attitude than it is about image. And what we are seeing at the present time, is a real opportunity for a change in attitude toward dentistry, courtesy of, you guessed



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it, Hollywood! If early interest is any guide, reality television may play a significant role in changing the decades-old attitudes about dentistry we have just described.

At the outset, we must offer a disclaimer. This writer is not a fan or aficionado of reality television or the weekly series titled "Extreme Makeover." However, if any of us has had the opportunity to view even one episode of this series that includes a dental "makeover," we should be able to understand the potential this show has to convince the populace that dentistry (and dentists) can open exciting new opportunities for even the average person. It is not about relief of pain or maintaining good oral health. It is about treatment that can bring about a massive change in self-esteem for those who seek it.

From what we have been hearing, the dental treatment shown in this series has created great interest, despite the severity, the cost, or any associated risks of treatment. Many will seek the benefits it offers, despite the costs or risks. At the same time, we must remember that in the past, and even in the present, there are some individuals who will continue to endure oral discomfort rather than pursue treatment they believe may provide a painful experience. It is a matter of attitude.

The real-life "makeover" vignettes have been showing that an objective of improved appearance and self-esteem becomes far more important than any of the associated risks or of the downsides, such as post-operative discomfort or recovery. It is also significant that the dental treatment is only a small part of a treatment plan that does involve more serious medical and surgical procedures. In such a situation, the dental treatment may be considered a less risky, less painful component. Of course the improved technology, materials, and management that contemporary dentistry can offer can also help to

put the patient at far greater ease in their goal-setting decision process. An improved smile provided by dental treatment may be one of the most noticeable and therefore most desirable incentives to be attained in a total cosmetic treatment package.

We believe that this real-life exposure to dental treatment as part of an extreme makeover plan could promote a significant long-term change in societal attitudes toward dentistry. Because of the improved self-esteem patients will achieve as a result of the effort put forth by the dental professional, we believe dentistry will be accorded a higher level of respect in the future.

The services provided in these "makeovers" shouldn't be considered reparative or oral health-centered. Nor are they purely cosmetic. Many dental colleagues may be uncomfortable with the promotion of this type of dental service. However, the value to the individual who seeks this kind of treatment will transcend the cosmetic label or the allegations of commercialism of the practitioner that might be forthcoming from critics within the profession. In the past, television newsmagazines have featured subjects unfavorable toward dentistry such as *Death in the Dental Chair*, *The Dangers of Mercury in Dental Amalgam*, and *The Threat of AIDS Transmission in the Dental Office*. Instead, a national television audience is now being exposed to dental treatment considered to be of great value to the self-esteem of those who seek and receive it.

It is clear those who will have the greatest interest in the benefits to be achieved from such a treatment plan are women. Not coincidentally, women are responsible for making a majority of dental appointments!

A simple, reality-based television program that may help to positively change existing negative societal attitudes toward dentistry? Stranger things have happened!

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