

Research: Something to Sink Your Teeth Into



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ILLUSTRATION
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When I was 15 I aspired to be an electrical engineer. With little or no concept of what an electrical engineer did — other than wear a pocket protector with half a dozen pens — the assumption there had to be electricity involved somehow was enough to sustain me. At the time, I was a ham radio enthusiast to the extent that my mother refused to enter my room for fear of being electrocuted. That I repeatedly subjected myself accidentally to the same treatment Jack Nicholson later received in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* without actually dying, did little to allay my mother's fears.

It was a lonesome avocation inasmuch as the friends I made were usually thousands of miles distant and we conversed only in Morse code. Texting and surgically

attached iPhones had not been invented yet. This delayed my social life and the discovery of girls by several years during which I mistakenly assumed they were just soft boys. Had I pursued my hobby much longer, I would have most surely fried myself before graduating from high school.

A close encounter with calculus and trigonometry effectively nullified a career as any kind of an engineer, a profession that seemed to me to have an unreasonable and incomprehensible reliance on numbers. Later, when I had transferred my interest to archeology, it was without any impetus from Indiana Jones who hadn't been born at the time. The thrill of discovering an ancient temple in some exotic locale loaded with gold and pre-

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cious stones enthralled me for years until I realized later that “Kansas Horseman” would never fit well on the marquee.

This chimera finally dissolved upon observing newsreels of the late Dr. Leaky and his crew squatting in some godforsaken dig in the desert painstakingly applying little paintbrushes to amorphous chunks of unidentifiable dirt that would prove later to be discarded chicken bones or an ancient Coke bottle.

Thus, it was at age 19 I found myself fulfilling the dreams of my father. “People have 32 teeth,” he shrewdly pointed out, “and at any given moment the odds are something is wrong with at least one of them. Plus, by the time you graduate, the world population will be something like 150 quadrillion people.” And he was right, so I retreated to a life of repetitive work, innocent pleasures and as little reflection as I can manage.

Until now. One profession I overlooked 65 years ago before acceding to my father’s ambitions — researcher — seems to offer unlimited opportunities. Apparently there isn’t a single solitary thing on earth that doesn’t cry out for researching. From the toxicity of hotdogs to the rate of nasal hair growth in the 65- to 75-year-old age bracket, the field is wide open. The trick seems to be getting a sponsor to pay for your efforts, but as somebody who already has plenty of money once observed, “If you love what you are doing, then it isn’t work.” Yes, it is.

The point is, as dentists, we could do a lot of this researching in our spare time. You know when you are talking face-to-face with somebody and they think you are looking them in the eye like a forthright, honest person is supposed to? Well, of course, we aren’t, we’re looking at their teeth. We’re thinking, “Number 9 has that little incisal chip and the thing is at least

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two shades darker than 8. Does she know this? Got to be a root canal or maybe whacked against a drinking fountain at school 30 years ago.”

The worst thing a dentist can imagine other than spying a totally missing anterior is an unreplaced upper first bi. What kind of a person would recklessly smile in public unless ortho treatment accounted for the space? A dental researcher would determine with direct, yet subtle questioning such as the make of the offender’s car, his gross adjusted income if more than \$100,000 per year and the number of his wife’s shoes that didn’t come from Payless before recommending he be taken right out and summarily shot.

A recent case in point was an in-depth study done to determine the validity of the old German folk saying that means “every child costs the mother a tooth.” Serious researchers do not believe German obstetricians considered this in any way replaced the deutsche mark as acceptable currency. In fact, this axiom risked disbelief when it was pointed out there are literally dozens of edentulous women who have not birthed 32 children, except possibly Old Mother Hubbard whose cupboard was later determined to be full of denture adhesives the dog didn’t care for.

U.S. researchers examined data on 2,635 women ages 18 to 64. These were sorted into low, middle, and high socioeconomic status. In the last category, “women with no children were missing

on average less than one tooth.” This could be interpreted as a retained root tip from a do-it-yourself extraction attempted with a Revlon eyelash curler to save money, thus accounting for the higher economic status. In this same group, those women with four or more children were found to be “missing about five teeth.” *About five?* This is pretty shoddy researching if you ask me. Let us hope any dentists who elect to go into research will retain the same high standards they applied in their practices where they knew without question whether a patient had five missing teeth or not.

Women in the lowest socioeconomic group with no children they could recall, were missing two teeth. If the old German saying was correct, these women have two unaccounted for kids. Somebody in the family should have been curious about what happened to them, at least to the extent of putting their pictures on milk cartons.

Finally, in this lowest economic group, those with four or more teeth were missing eight children. **NO**, wait, the other way around. I suspect a sizeable number of these women when accosted by a researcher and asked how many missing teeth they had and what was the limit on their VISA cards, would shout, “Harold! There’s some nut at the door wanting to know how many teeth I’ve lost. Call 911!”

Researching doesn’t have to be this complicated. Taking a tip from lawyers, researchers should never ask questions they don’t already know the answers to. This saves a lot of confusion and would have revealed old German folk sayings are no more reliable than old American folk sayings such as claiming “It ain’t over ‘til the fat lady sings.” More often than not, it is. ■■■■