

Origin and Evolution of the Dental Wellness Center

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“Most of the things we do are with our hands. What animates the hands comes from the head and heart.” *Dr. Robert P. McBride*

For those who may be searching for a new dentist, the following will highlight aspects of The Dental Wellness Center that shaped its formation, and how it contrasts with most other dental practices.

Rude Awakening

Having graduated from dental school with honors, especially in the area of manual dexterity, I thought that I would be able to offer my patients exceptional treatment in the area of dental repairs, teeth replacements and skillful teeth cleanings that would help them keep their teeth for a lifetime. It didn’t take me long to realize that, in spite of my best repairs, replacements and cleanings, some of my patients continued to have decay, gum disease, and broken and worn teeth. This disturbed me greatly because I had borrowed money and spent a lot of time and learning to be a good dentist, yet I really didn’t have an answer for these patients.

Treating Cause or Effect?

During our four year stint in dental school, we learn about the entire human body by dissecting it for two years. We look at human tissue and bacteria through microscopes, while at the same time, performing projects to improve our manual dexterity. Hardly any time is spent on how to run a dental practice, or how to put together all that we had learned to help our patients prevent dental disease. I was discovering that although teeth repairs, replacements and cleanings worked well for some people, the same efforts were going down the drain for far too many others. I knew that there was something lacking in the area of preventive dentistry that caused me great angst. I made a resolution to continue my education in this area so that all my patients could have more success.

Why the Angst?

This angst took me on an educational adventure, sometimes outside the realm of dentistry. For instance, although we learned in dental school that the main cause of gum disease and tooth decay is bad oral bacteria, we were taught to only occasionally clean the patients’ teeth and basically give them lip service about how to care for their mouths. This worked for some people, but definitely not for the segment of patients that were my main concern. My ongoing post graduate educational process gave me more of a keen awareness of how the teeth and gums are only two components of a vast network of muscles, nerves, ligaments and vessels, each of which need to work together in harmony for optimum oral system health. They exist in the head, which is connected to the rest of the body. I was learning more and more how the health of mouth can influence the rest of the body, as well as be affected by it. As I was learning more about the bacterial culprits that cause gums to bleed and teeth to decay, why they wear and break, and how an uneven bite can cause headaches, neck and shoulder pain as well as balance problems, I was beginning to realize the reason for the angst that I had been feeling - a limited education in what I was beginning to feel most important - patient education.

Working and Waking Up Within a “Fix-it” System

I realized that I was unwittingly working within a system fostered by a dental education structure that mainly has to do with treating the *effects* of dental disease, and a dental insurance industry that correspondingly supports it through providing benefits for only basic repairs and none for prevention, aside from basic teeth cleanings. It's a system primarily based on doing things to people with problems, rather than having them learn the "why" behind them and what they could do about it. Even though we learned about the mouth and other segments of the human body in dental school, we were not taught about how they are all connected, nor did we learn how to engage and teach our patients to become partners in a process that requires the mutual interest of both the doctor and patient. It was a wake-up call for me, because as I was learning more and more about how teeth, mouths and people are different, I learned that the word “doctor” comes from the Latin word, “teacher.” I was discovering that the source of most dental patient problems lie in what they hadn’t been taught. This is why I rarely see new dental patients who really know how to perform effective home care - because they have never been given the time and opportunity to be taught properly.

The Start of an Evolution: Defining the Problem

Another factor contributing to my unease was that I knew of no other dental practice in my area that was based on prevention. However, there were a few organizations that I joined with dentists who were looking at the bigger picture of dental disease prevention and the obstacles that stood in the way of incorporating it into their dental practices. It was encouraging to be among colleagues who were looking for an answer to the same problem I was experiencing. As it is with the cause of dental disease, the solution to any problem starts with defining its cause, and the cause in my case was becoming more and more clear.

The Cause: Misplaced Responsibility

My seminal “AHA!” moment came when I really put my finger on the basic cause of my distress: if I wanted to have my patients attain optimum oral health through education and prevention to give the best chance of long-lasting success for my excellent tooth repairs and replacements that had garnered me accolades in dental school, I needed to bail out of the prevailing “fix-it” system. I needed to somehow develop an environment that would facilitate my patients becoming healthy. I now realized that my angst in watching many of my patients going backwards in spite of my best efforts was that I was taking on the responsibility for my patients’ health! It was really starting to sink in that health cannot be purchased nor given away - **I really needed the help of my patients if they were to become healthy!**

Barriers Encountered and Resolved

Along with having no training in practice management or teaching, and no nearby mentors in this area, I was also confronted with the “insurance mentality” of many of my patients who only wanted treatment that was covered by their dental insurance. Dental insurance companies have no regard for the difficulty and individual complexity of many dental procedures. They offer inadequate preventive

benefits, and relative to teeth repairs and replacements per their own acronym “LEAT,” offer only the Least Expensive Alternate Treatment.

Early on, like 99% of my colleagues, I signed on with dental insurance companies. It is done as a marketing move, in that the insured patient receives a list of dentists who are on their plan in their area. They call the dentist for an appointment which involves zero marketing cost for the dentist - or is that really the case? What the dentist really pays for in procuring these patients is a loss of his autonomy. Treatment decisions are based on the least costly treatments, with no real preventive benefits, which fosters the above-mentioned insurance attitude from patients, as well as the dentist mainly providing "fix-it" care which is where the real insurance benefits lie. Other barriers encountered were finding and training staff in high-level oral assessment and preventive protocols, and developing a physical environment conducive to relationship building and learning.

Destination Arrived, and Still Growing

The Dental Wellness Center has evolved, and continues to do so through having taken the risk of cutting off all insurance contracts and losing that stream of patients at great financial peril. Along with losing those patients and corresponding loss of income, it took a major investment of time and resources in modifying the physical environment to one that is conducive to relationship-building and patient education with a team of well-trained staff who are all health-centered and walk their talk. The Dental Wellness Center realizes the importance of early disease detection through advanced assessment procedures. This is the key to evaluating the uniqueness of each patient in improving their oral and systemic health, oral function and appearance.

True Teamwork

The dental team are all patients of the Center and continue to benefit from what it has to offer. As patients themselves, they have the unique ability to see things through the patients' eyes. This greatly enhances their ability to ensure patient comfort and to assist me in providing the best possible dental treatments. The Dental Wellness Center is all about educating patients. We put you at the helm through your having learned about the nature of your oral system to such a degree that you can make informed choices about its future. If you are seeking a dental practice that has patient education at its core, with sustained health and wellness as its vision, then welcome to our world!