

An Essential Ingredient in the Development of Oral Health: Desire

I love working with patients who have a high desire and commitment to keep their natural teeth and optimize their oral and systemic health. Why? Because they get amazing long-term results compared to those looking for the bare minimum "fix it" care. It validates my early career decision to buck the tide of traditional, insurance-driven dentistry and develop my Dental Wellness Center. From the first appointment on, my team and I get to know the patient and engage them in a unique, co-learning process wherein they can learn about the status of their oral system and make their own decisions regarding its future.

Time is spent in the beginning appointments performing a comprehensive oral examination, collecting data such as necessary x-rays; intra and extra-oral photographs; laboratory bacterial assessments; and mouth models – all resulting in a written Review of Findings that outlines the best options for a healthy oral future. It is quite disheartening to go through this process and discover afterwards that the patient isn't really interested in pursuing a path towards optimum oral health to preserve their natural teeth and improve their well being. The process requires a matched desire between the patient and office.

Many dental patients see the dentist as someone who can "save my teeth." I believe that this attitude stems from the doctor-patient relationship predominant in the traditional dental model, which is an offshoot of the traditional medical model. It has taught the U.S. population that the doctor holds the main responsibility for health, dispensed through medications that basically address symptoms, not causes. Similarly, most traditional dental practices mainly advertize fillings, crowns, implants and cosmetic dentistry, with relatively little emphasis on assessment of the oral environment to discover the causes for needing most of these treatments in the first place. Health-centered, preventive dental care resulting in optimum oral health and its positive influence on systemic health requires an understanding of the mutual roles that the doctor and patient play in its development. As indicated, an ideal arrangement for health development requires a matched interest, desire and accountability on the part of both doctor and patient.

These preventive assessment and treatment protocols are not taught in dental schools. Their implementation within the Dental Wellness Center requires that professionals within it be continually engaged in post graduate studies, including not only advanced treatment technologies, but also protocols that address the causes of oral disease. This results in an office environment staffed with like-minded professionals who not only have health-centered values, but are patients of the practice as well. They model the results of their preventive and technological treatment.

Through the years, I have observed several factors that lie behind most dental problems. Aside from some people who place a low value in their dental and general health, a major factor has to do with what dental patients haven't been taught. Many, even those receiving regular traditional dental care, simply don't know how to take care of their mouths. I believe that there are several reasons for this. The traditional dental model is basically driven by the insurance industry, which offers a bare minimum of monetary benefits for patient education and prevention. Therefore, it is not emphasized in most dental practices. Also, dental school entrance criteria have little to do with the applicant's ability or desire to facilitate or teach health. They are mainly based on dexterity tests and undergraduate grades. Dental school curricula mainly involve the development of the student's cognitive and dexterity skills, with little or no emphasis on how to effectively educate patients.

Other problems that I see are caused by dental treatment procedures performed without consideration of the teeth being part of a multi-element system, all of which need to work together in harmony for long-term oral health. It is not uncommon to see new patients with bite-related head and neck symptoms whose teeth and jaw joints are mismatched from dental repairs and orthodontic treatment performed without consideration of this important interrelationship. Dentists are taught primarily how to fix and replace teeth, not how they look and function within a healthy oral system.

A wellness model recognizes the reciprocal relationship that exists between oral and general health: that the state of one can influence the state of the other, and that neither can be improved by simply dispensing pills or making dental repairs. The insurance-driven traditional medical and dental models each see the doctor as the dispenser of health and the patient as a receiver/supplicant. A wellness mode sees the doctor as a facilitator and the patient a willing partner wherein an interactive co-learning process occurs. The result is an understanding of the patient's oral health status along with agreed-upon positive solutions. A main contrasting factor between a traditional and wellness mode is the time that it takes to go through this process. This factor is becoming even less recognized by insurance companies, which translates to appointment times becoming both shorter and more impersonal in both medical and dental practices. It is much more profitable for the insurance companies to have the doctor dispense pills or do patch-up dental treatment than pay for the time it takes for an interactive learning process.

At the Dental Wellness Center, we recognize that people and their mouths are unique. Because of this, initial time is allotted to get to know the patient and discover the specific causes of problems, rather than simply making a list of symptom-related repairs. Our mission is based on an educational process wherein the patient develops a full understanding of the status of their oral system so that they can make prudent decisions regarding its future. Our oral assessment, educational, preventive and treatment protocols have been designed to work with individuals who have a high desire to optimize their oral health and are willing to embrace their role in its development.