

## **Some Words on the Path to Becoming a Holistic Practice**

Many articles I've written on our website have to do with how The Dental Wellness Center's holistic\* approach differs from traditional dental practices. It is gratifying to find that as more people read my articles, more and more are coming into the practice as new patients, people that are seeking a more learning-based dental practice with a holistic philosophy. The following is a brief history of my own learning process as a dentist and how my practice evolved into becoming a holistic Wellness Center.

Not long after dental school I discovered that many of my patients continued to have dental disease in spite of all of my best efforts. As frustrating as this was, it was also a time in which I found inspiration in things I'd heard in the past, words that began resonating with me, such as:

“People who keep their teeth live an average of ten years longer than people who lose their teeth” Charles H. Mayo, Founder of Mayo Brothers Clinic – and he said that almost 100 years ago!

"In almost all ailments of the heart caused by bacteria, the source of infection is known to be the pathologic and infected environment of the teeth” Charles C. Bass, M.D., cardiologist American Heart Journal, May 1965

This furthered my quest to find better methods for treating my patients. It didn't take long for me to discover that the profession that I was a part of, that of traditional dentistry, was at its core a fix it, replace it, make-it-prettier industry. It had little to do with discovering causes of afflictions of the oral environment in the areas of gum (periodontal) disease and decay, and functional disharmonies in the relationship between the teeth and jaw joints (TMJ's), all areas that I was profoundly interested in. On the contrary, the majority of dental post graduate education courses centered on repairing the symptoms of disease such as application of porcelain technology (crowns, veneers), replacement of teeth with implants and marketing techniques to be able to increase “production,” with very little addressing any kind of holistic approach.

While there is nothing wrong with improving one's skills in providing optimal reparative and cosmetic care (a significant portion of my post graduate education has been spent enhancing my knowledge and skill in these areas), I still felt that there was much more to learn about how mouth health influences and is influenced by the health of the body as a whole. As I began learning more about the connection between dental and bodily health, I began realizing that most new patients' dental problems stemmed from what they hadn't been taught as well as past dentistry that was performed without consideration of the teeth being just one component of a multi-component, dynamic, biologic system. It became apparent that repairing and replacing teeth without taking the rest of these elements into consideration could invite disastrous results down the line, if not immediately perceived. I also discovered that:

Most people's teeth are not in exact alignment with the jaw joints. With some who are adaptable, this may never be a problem. Others, however, have resultant signs and symptoms such as tooth wear, migraines, head, neck and shoulder pain and aren't aware of the teeth-jaw joint misalignment and its relationship to these conditions.

Eight out of ten new patients have some form of gum disease and only one out of ten has ever had their gums measured for pockets and inflammation (a basic procedure that we learned in dental school). I have found that only one in five that have been measured understands the significance of this very basic assessment, because it hasn't been adequately explained to them.

Only one in fifty patients has had a dentist or hygienist have them actually demonstrate their self-care procedures to determine if they are being effective.

Although many of my new patients have heard about the connection between sick gums and bodily health, I've found none as yet who have been given adequate information about this connection and its' importance.

The above discoveries are what led me away from traditional dentistry and towards my dream of creating the Dental Wellness Center, which has as its central mission the educating of patients about their oral system to such a degree that they can make informed choices about its future – a far cry from simply recommending cleanings, crowns and cosmetics.

This was not done in a day, however, as I had to first learn more about the mouth-body connection before imparting it to my patients, and there were very few good mentors out there for guidance along the way. As well, changing from a traditional drill/fill/bill mentality as learned in dental school to a more holistic, educational process that involves teaching and mutual participation, carried with it some very unique challenges. There were no boilerplate systems out there by which to model this holistic, health-centered paradigm. New systems needed to be developed; the physical environment needed to be modified to accommodate the learning process; like-minded personnel needed to be found and trained. The transition from telling and treating a passive patient to developing an actual relationship with them that supports a learning process was a huge learning curve for me, as I'm sure it was also for my patients that experienced it. You see, dentists are not selected for dental school based on their teaching ability nor are they trained within school to be teachers. This is something that I had to develop within myself as a dentist, and it marked a big turning point in my own personal and professional growth.

Several years ago I gave a presentation to a group of holistic medical providers from the Holistic Medical Association. The heading of their purpose statement was, "The Holistic Medical Association *views the patient as being ultimately responsible for his/her well-being.*" This of

course was viewed in a context of other essentials having to do with patient education and developing roles of responsibility between doctor and patient, but as I learned how this approach was being successfully practiced by a group of wonderful, caring individuals in the medical community, it only validated my belief that the Dental Wellness Center's primary mission be that of educating its patients.

Anyone that comes to the Dental Wellness Center will find that the entire process of engaging the new patient is different with a holistic approach. In a traditional dental practice you may (or may not) have a very thorough dental examination, but the main purpose is that of finding treatment

needing to be done, not so much in dealing with the cause for their need. Our holistic approach begins with a learning process for both the dentist and the patient during the initial patient interview (also called "co-diagnosis"), which is a "get to know each other" process that involves a review of medical and dental histories and then the oral examination itself. Teeth cleanings are not performed initially, so that the new patient can first have an opportunity to thoroughly understand the status of his/her oral health. (this is explained in my article, "*The Reality of Teeth Cleanings and How to Effectively Change an Oral Environment*")

A written Review of Findings is then presented and discussed at a separate consultation appointment. Much time is spent up front for these initial procedures so that the patient can make informed decisions about preventive and treatment options that suit their goals and budgets.

So why am I compelled to spend the time it takes to do a thorough job in teaching my patients? Because I believe that it's the right thing to do, to empower them with proper information about their mouths so that they can take steps that will get them to the level of health that they would desire. Also because I get satisfaction from seeing the remarkable results that my patients experience after having gone through the process, such as cessation of head and neck pain and tooth wear and reduction in the bodily burden of inflammation through the healing of gum disease. I have discovered that when given a choice, most new patients are looking for an opportunity to have a preferred dental future rather than simply waiting for the next treatment event to occur. Not one patient in over thirty five years has ever indicated that they have gone through such a thorough process. This is something that we are proud of and continue to strive for. We want people to learn about this wonderful, interrelated oral system of theirs in a pleasant and supportive environment, something that we offer at the Dental Wellness Center. As your holistic dentist, I want to share what I've learned through the years to help you attain optimal oral system health.

\*holistic: "concerned with all factors, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, that affect health, rather than treating isolated diseases and symptoms (*Thorndyke & Barnhart Dictionary Definition*)