

Editorial

THE HIGH COST OF CARING



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

Can we ever forget those mantras ingrained in all of us in dental school: "True professionals put the needs of their patients before their own;" and "First, do no harm!" Even though it can be difficult to keep these maxims in focus on a daily basis, most of the dentists I know aspire to these ideals.

Recently as I was driving to the clinic where I do my one day of clinical practice per week, I was reflecting on the articles by Drs. Christine Botchway and Ron Frey in this edition of the *Journal*. Dr. Botchway contends that dentistry is a very stressful profession, but that there is a culture of denial about stress among dentists. Dr. Frey highlights the fact that something more serious, such as depression, may be at play when a dentist is said to suffer from "burnout." Both articles remind us that sometimes practitioners need help to deal with the

feelings and conditions brought on by stress in clinical practice.

Mulling over the articles and thinking of my clinical day ahead, I reminded myself that to really enjoy my day, I ought to go out of my way to show care and compassion for the patients that I would see. I don't know how it is with you, but this attitude of caring does not always come naturally to me, especially when I feel stressed in the clinic.

My mind flashed to some of the days when I was rushed and stressed, when I would almost lift the back of the reclined patient's chair with my tensed legs. Days when I was short-tempered and unfeeling to the concerns of patients. I know that on days like that I can't provide an optimal service to patients.

That day, however, I was rewarded for consciously taking extra care. I felt the true joy of helping people who were in pain and who needed to be dealt with in a sensitive manner. Even though the service I was providing was "emergency care" in a clinic for people with low income, by empathizing with my patients I was exposed to the ultimate payback of working in a healing profession.

I went home walking on air that day, despite the fact that I had removed the last remaining upper teeth for a 26-year-old man. This fellow had come to see me a couple of weeks before, basically begging me to extract all his remaining upper teeth. He told me that other dentists had refused to extract the teeth because they were technically savable. He couldn't afford extensive crown and bridge work, as he earned \$7 per hour in temporary employment.

He told me he had grown a long moustache and beard to hide his mouth. He felt that an upper denture would give him a fresh start and that an improved appearance would allow him to better his lot. Even though I might technically be doing the "wrong thing" in the eyes of some of my colleagues, I felt that this man had made up his mind. I should

put technical considerations aside and accede to his strongly held wish. It was dealing with this fellow as a person, rather than a "mouth", that made my interactions with him rewarding.

Because of my own difficulty in dealing with stressful situations in clinical practice, I have a lot of sympathy for any dentist who "goes to the edge" because of stress. I have just read through some excellent literature produced by the Ontario Dental Association about its Dentists at Risk program. I believe there is a comprehensive infrastructure of such programs run by dental organizations across the country, and by CDSPI, through its Members' Assistance Program (phone: 1-800-268-5211). I recommend that each dentist become aware of the local contacts for these programs. We never know when we will need to seek help — for ourselves or others.

With help available to dentists, there is no reason for any one of us to feel alone if the stresses of practice become too much. I will leave the last words to Dr. Bob Brandon of London, Ontario, who has done so much for our profession through the Ontario Dentists at Risk program.

In an interview that appeared in the *Journal* (*J Can Dent Assoc* 1992; 58:900-4), Dr. Brandon advises us that there are three important issues for dentists to consider with regard to stress: let's not set unrealistic expectations for ourselves in our professional lives; let's pamper ourselves a little bit by recharging our batteries; and please let's seek help early, if we or a colleague is in trouble. One of the great aspects of our profession is that our colleagues can help us in such times of difficulty.

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