

## DEBATE



# Practice Management in Dental Schools — Is There Such a Thing?

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For a number of years, dental students have expressed to various dental associations and organizations the need to increase the time allocated to practice management in dental school. As students, we are constantly reminded of the fact that our profession is part “technical” dentistry and part entrepreneurship. It seems that business skills are as important — if not more so — than clinical skills, since owning a dental practice is really equivalent to running a small to medium-sized business. By any yardstick, we receive very little education in the latter field.

Today, dentists are faced with increased competition in the marketplace for a number of reasons. There are more dental professionals on the market and many of these professionals are retiring later in life than hitherto. As the incidence of dental disease decreases, the demand for dental services goes down, in turn creating more competition.

What does all this mean to graduating students and new dentists? First, they must get to know their patients. After all, knowing

your clientele helps you make better business decisions. This entails learning to gauge patients’ psychological state, their financial status and the dental benefits coverage they receive, if any. They must also be sensitive to their patients’ cultural background.

Most importantly, though, students and new dentists must be taught about the expectations of their patients with respect to their treatment. For example, patients are increasingly becoming familiar with such terms as “laser dentistry,” “intraoral cameras,” “pain-free needles,” etc. Through television and print reporting and advertising, patients are learning about the latest developments in medicine and dentistry. Their knowledge of these advances may be superficial, but they are nevertheless familiar with the popular “catchwords,” if you will. With this familiarity comes expectations — the belief, for example, that every dentist is not only knowledgeable about the new techniques but possesses all the appropriate equipment as well. These expectations will be a contributing factor in our patients’ sat-

isfaction — or dissatisfaction — with the treatment they receive.

So if I, as a young dentist, want to ensure the satisfaction of my patients, I may want to have all this “state-of-the-art” equipment. In my inexperience, I have to pose a number of questions related to this desire. Do I know what the price of a particular piece of equipment should be? Do I know if there are tax benefits to renting versus purchasing such equipment? Can I even rent this equipment?

Then I ask myself, Do I show my staff how to use this equipment? What if a staff member breaks my equipment? Is that person responsible for the equipment if he or she should happen to break it? Can I fire staff for breaking my equipment? Do I dock their pay? I might sound pretty harsh by asking these questions, but the fact is that I have never had to deal with staff who work under me and I have never owned equipment worth thousands of dollars before.

These questions lead to others. What do I know about human

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resources and staff management? Well, I know that some offices employ a large number of people and some a lot less. Staff positions may include office managers, receptionists, one or two hygienists, an assistant, and perhaps a lab technician. Do I know the first thing about how to employ somebody? What to look for in a team member? How do I help maintain healthy attitudes and keep the staff happy? Do I know the legal workings involved in dismissing a staff member or negotiating with one if problems arise? Do I have the proper negotiation and conflict resolution skills to deal with these situations?

The answer to all of the preceding questions is simple: No! If I had decided that I wanted to operate a small to medium-sized business when I was choosing a career path, I would have gone to busi-

ness school, or at the very least taken some business courses. Now I find myself graduating from dental school having to deal with issues such as marketing, contracts (office leasing and employment), associating and staffing, to name just a few — subjects that are thoroughly taught to individuals seeking a career in business.

So, when all is said and done, who is responsible for educating dentists on how to run their business? Are dentists expected to be self-taught on the subject? Should those who wish to become more educated be referred to the business faculty of their university or to private institutions for such training (and, as a result, face a bigger debt load because they wish to be better prepared)? Or should dental schools take responsibility for educating their students and seek out

qualified individuals who will teach them about the “other part” of their profession?

Some schools, it is true, do offer a good grounding in practice management. The fact is, however, that most dental programs are deficient in this area. Practice management education should be incorporated into the accreditation process for all dental schools in order to standardize the quality of education across the country. ■

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