

For the past ten years, I have had the honor and privilege to be an Instructor at the Aesthetic Advantage Hands-On Symposium, at the NYU College of Dentistry in New York, as well as an Instructor at the General Practice Residency at Morristown Medical Center. During this entire time, the most asked question from students and residents has been “How can I do more of the big cases in my practice?” I feel that in today’s world of economic uncertainty, the answers to this question are significantly different than even several years ago.

There was a time not that long ago that I would have answered by using examples of advertising and marketing to draw patients to the office specifically for esthetic treatment. There was a buzz about cosmetics, and the primary goal was to attract those people who had already made the decision to have these procedures done. The times have obviously changed, however, and the answers that I now give to the above question are very different.

The keys to being able to attract the large restorative cases in today’s world are communication and treatment planning. The number of patients coming in exclusively for esthetic dentistry has declined significantly in most practices, but the need for restorative care continues to grow as our baby boomer generation (myself included) continues to wear and break their dentition. This is the patient population that needs comprehensive, and thus esthetic dental treatment.

Many of these patients are unaware of the options that are available to them in the modern dental practice, and it is our obligation for us to open our patient’s eyes to the possibilities that exist for them. Recognition of declining dental health, particularly in long-standing hygiene patients, should not be ignored or glossed over. This can be a difficult conversation to have, and it must be presented in such a way that the patient doesn’t feel that their health had been overlooked in previous visits. An example of a way to begin this discussion would be “Mrs. Smith, we know that as time goes by, the teeth undergo a process of wear and tear, and it eventually reaches a point at which we need to intervene to stop the process, and restore your mouth to optimum health so that going forward, you will not have to worry about continuing breakdown.” In this way, there is an acknowledgement of a problem, and also of an available solution, and an opening for future conversations. Obviously, the ability to recognize occlusal instabilities, restoration breakdown, and other signs of chronic diseases of the dentition is essential.

I have also found that people are taking a longer time to make major financial decisions in all aspects of their lives, and certainly dentistry would be included. This creates a situation where we as dentists must communicate with great precision regarding both the needs and wants of our patients. In Dr. Daniel Goleman’s book “Emotional Intelligence”, he discusses in great detail the role that different personality styles must be approached in ways that will allow us to connect with them. As an example, the middle aged woman whose daughter is getting married and wants to enhance her smile must be approached differently than a sixty five year old who is about to retire and wants their teeth fixed before they retire. Ironically, the treatment plans for these two patients might be exactly the same, but the communication techniques used with each must be very different. The awareness of our patients’ “EQ” is essential to getting them to appreciate the treatment that we have to offer them.

In 2014, it will not be the goal in our practice to “hit a home run” with each and every new patient that has entered the practice. More realistically, we have attempted to accurately diagnose all existing problems, discuss treatment options, create a priority list, and develop a relationship of caring and mutual trust. It is this way that the table is set for the “big cases”, whether they are done at the beginning of the relationship with the patient, or at a later time when that treatment fits in with that person’s life more comfortably.