

# *The Right Dentist For You*



## CHAPTER 12

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t's a tale of two patients.

Betty, a very nice person, had been coming to us intermittently for years, usually for emergencies and an occasional cleaning. Slowly, over time, her mouth had degraded, teeth had yellowed, and fillings that needed to be replaced had darkened. Missing teeth had gone unreplaced. Her bite worsened. And now she was beginning to experience jaw pain.

She told me that she had been recently diagnosed as being diabetic and her gum condition was bad. Her gums bled easily and she had chronic bad breath that wouldn't go away.

In spite of all our efforts to get Betty to do something about her teeth, she hadn't. And sadly, she never did.

Sometime after this particular visit, Betty was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died. What people don't know is, is if you have periodontal disease the chances of you having cancer increases.

Debbie, on the other hand, had come to us on a referral from another patient and was in a lot of trouble. She was very candid in her description of her condition. And she understood that the problem had started with her.

She also knew that she was going to have to do a lot and pay a lot to get things fixed. The good news for Debbie is that she did all that work. She did her regular maintenance. She did her home care. She did what she needed to maintain her oral health.

These many years later, Debbie now has six grandchildren and enjoys her life very much. For us that's been a stunning success. We want you to have that too.

You know, dentists and patients have two distinctly different points of view. If you mention the word dentist to the average person, most will respond negatively.

If you ask that same person about their smile or their teeth, they generally have a positive view.

To say that dentists aren't aware of this is putting one's head in the sand. Understand the dentist's dilemma. They work in a small dark, wet hole that moves, very limited access, and a tongue that has something to say about the dentist being there. And the dentist is supposed to make conditions better with treatments that last. This is all done with the precision of a Swiss watch, while tending to the emotional needs of the patient.

From the patient's perspective, "I get to open my mouth so the dentist can get in there and I get poked on, sometimes with sharp instruments. Sometimes I've had pain I didn't predict and it's uncomfortable. I get to pay money to get all this done." That's not a pretty picture either.

People know less about dentistry than any other health profession. They should know more, which is the reason for this book.

Usually geographic location is not the best way to choose the dentist. Why? Because it's the luck of the draw. Yet 80% of all people do choose based upon geographic location alone.

If we're looking for good care from a good dentist, you might get lucky and you might not.

Check to see what the atmosphere is like in their office. Does it feel right to you? Does it look right? Do they appear to be up to date? Do they have technology that makes sense in today's world? Do you want a dentist who's outgoing or someone who remains quiet? Do you want a teacher and explainer or do you want to lay there and have your work done with as little communication as possible?

It's important for everybody to understand each other: the dentist and the patient and the staff. Some people make the mistake of withholding information because they don't trust dentists or dentistry. That can create serious problems for you. What you withhold may impact you very negatively.

A good dentist will talk you out of care that's not right for you. At the same

### ***So, how can you find a trusted dental advisor, a good dentist to help you?***

Among other things:

- Call and talk to their office.
- Talk to their staff.
- Take a tour of their practice.
- Listen to what their patients have to say.
- Listen to what other dentists have to say about them.
- Interview the dentist, get your questions answered.
- Check your own instinctive gut reaction.
- Are you comfortable with them?
- Does your personality match up well so that you can get along well?
- Does the facility of the practice match what you think it should be?
- Does the dentist show a passion for the field?
- How much training does the dentist have?
- How many years of experience?

time, they will proactively work to move you to choose the right choices for you.

They will communicate with you. They'll try to make you a friend just as you should try to make a friend of them.

As a patient you have certain rights.

You have rights to good care. You have rights to explanations of care. You have the right to fairness in fee. You have a right to good personal care and treatment. You have the right to be remembered for who you are and for follow up. You have the right to get care that's tailored to you. And you have the right to have as positive a dental experience as possible.

If you want to be an outstanding patient then you have a responsibility, as well. This responsibility is to help the dentist be as successful as possible with you and other patients, to speak up when you see something that's not quite right and to tell them honestly what's going on.

You should communicate even when it's inconvenient to do so, which may mean picking up the phone and calling the dentist and let them know something that happened positively or negatively.

Dentistry is far more interactive than other areas of health care. It happens more frequently. And for this reason, it is necessary that you have a dentist that you like, enjoy and that you know does good work for you.

If the dentist makes you a promise that you doubt anyone can keep, beware. When you ask for success rates, understand they're probably going to talk to you in percentages and likelihoods and possibilities.

Look for a dentist who is involved in continuing training, who trains others or takes a lot of training on their own. If they've written articles or books, so much the better.

Are they available when you need them around? Are they accessible?

Choosing a good dentist and having a good relationship with your dentist is imperative for having dental health for your lifetime. With what we know, it is critical that you make good choices.

If you don't feel that you've made a good choice, find someone you can trust and feel comfortable with. And then tell them all they need to know, do all you need to do and you'll have a gorgeous smile that helps you live your best life.

## **Another Way of Looking at Things:**

If you need a painting hung or a shelf put up in your house or apartment you have 3 options. You can do it yourself, ask a friend or relative to help you or hire a handyman. For little jobs, these three options can work well. There's little that can go wrong other than winding up with a crooked picture or shelf. Of course, you could always hit a nail into a pipe but we won't even go there.

When it comes to bigger issues such as electrical or plumbing work, you'll probably want the security of finding someone with experience, perhaps a license and maybe even bonded. This way you can assure that you're going to have work done that is up to code and should things go wrong, you have recourse. Of course, you'll probably also want to check out their references and online ratings.

If you were going to build a house, you'd probably hire an architect and a builder. They will then coordinate all the subcontractors and supervise the work. They will make sure (you hope) that all will

be done according to code, local laws and specifications, assuring a safe and long lasting result.

This same thought process could be transposed to dental care. The big difference is that it's your mouth and health we're talking about. You would probably want to be just a little more careful.

You can Do It Yourself when it comes to whitening (as long as you follow directions). Drug stores sell a host of do it yourself products from make your own mouthguard and bite-splints to temporary fillings and even tartar scrapers. Please use caution when doing things yourself. You may not appreciate some of the complications that can arise until it's too late. An ill-fitting bite guard for instance can cause the teeth to shift and make Temporo Mandibular Dysfunction even worse.

For routine matters like a small filling, your average dentist, like the handyman, should be more than adequate. For more involved work such as orthodontics, implants, TMJ, gum treatments and oral surgery you may want someone with more advanced and/or specialized training and expertise. You may even want a specialist.

Issues arise when a person has problems that go unrecognized by a professional because they don't really see the "big picture" or take the time. While this probably represents only a small percentage of all people, you don't want to be among them and in the care of someone without that outlook, philosophy and capability. People with existing "big problems" and those with "big problem" potential need a dentist who is an architect, engineer, designer, general contractor and handyman all rolled into one. These "super dentists" are hard to find. Reading this book should help you locate one.

The other issue is that big problems can creep up slowly. If little problems go untreated or undiagnosed, they can eventually lead to big problems. That's what you read earlier in "Sarah's Story." Little

problems went undiagnosed until they blew up. So even if you start with a dentist who is adequate for your current needs, how do you know you're not going to need one with more experience down the road? You might and you need to know when. Again, educate yourself by reading this book and learn about yourself. It is the best way to protect yourself.

One of the issues I have with the insurance industry is that they are the enablers of "patch up" dentistry. They encourage dentists to think small and not to look at the bigger picture. Looking at the bigger picture could mean bigger, more complex treatment, which insurance companies will not cover as nearly all "plans" have meager yearly maximums. They'd prefer you spread treatment out over time, something that often is not in your best interest. If you had 2 broken fingers, would you want one fixed now and the other fixed next year? Of course not but that's just what insurance companies encourage by their plans' design and implementation.

They also pay little for diagnostics as compared to procedures. This has become the medical insurance model. You make more money when you spend time in or on the patient than you do talking to the patient. Knowing your patient and obtaining a thorough medical history is a very time consuming job. Yet, it pays off when developing a relationship and a treatment plan that truly fits the individual needs of the person. Yet again, insurance companies try to commoditize everything. They act (and pay) as if all fillings are the same, all diseases are the same and all patients are the same. Nothing could be further from the truth. The system is broken.

Of course, dentists should know better. They're taught the right way. Right? Wrong! Even in dental schools there are mixed messages sent. In theory, dental students are taught to do the right

thing. Unfortunately, most dental schools rely on patients who have public assistance (Medicaid and alike) to fill their clinics. With fiscal restraints, these programs also severely limit the amount and types of treatment dental students can render to their patients. So, even in dental school clinics, students are not often able to treat the “big problem” patients.

Plus, big problem treatment can take a long time and involve other specialties. Even in a 2-year course of post-graduate training, it is difficult to see a single big problem case through from start to finish. No wonder many dentists aren’t capable of caring for people with big problems.

Once a dentist graduates, he or she often takes some form of postgraduate study. There are Hospital based, General Practice Residency programs (GPR), Advanced Education in General Dentistry programs (AEGD) and of course specialty training programs. Because neither dental schools nor even graduate programs have been able to adequately satisfy the requirements of very sophisticated care many alternative and supplemental training institutes have arisen. The Scottsdale Center for Dentistry, The Las Vegas Institute, The Pankey Institute and the Dawson Academy are just a few examples of the many organizations that have arisen to fill the void of inadequate dental school education. Better dentists take continuing education as a matter of routine, not just mandate and often belong to a study club or institute where they can continually receive education as well as feedback and direction for their practice and advice with challenging circumstances. In this way, they continually learn and improve their ability to deliver optimum care to their patients. There are even online forums where doctors can discuss their patient-care issues and obtain continuing education.

As you have already seen, “big problem” dentistry requires a keen diagnostician. First you have to see the problem. Then you’ll need either a “super-dentist” who can do it all or a great “quarterback” who works with a stellar team of specialists who can structure and implement the agreed-to plan. This is not an easy feat. It is one that may be made easier with the knowledge contained in these pages.