

Intimate And Interactive Charts Course For Monday Morning

By Dr. Joshua Charlat

"Education is the ability to meet life's situations."

-Dr. John G. Hibbens

It is exhilarating to consider all of the advances and challenges, which we will embrace over the next few years. The opportunities in our profession are infinite. Today, we have within our reach the ability to provide our patients with unsurpassed care. We can restore them physically to a state of oral health, and mentally to a sense of well-being.

Each year, scientific research further demonstrates the importance of total body health. As an example, the direct link between periodontal health and cardiovascular health is now more clearly understood. The public is better educated regarding the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. People want to live longer, with an enriched quality of life.

As dentists, our responsibilities have changed or rather, for what we are responsible has changed. Our patients have greater demands as their dental "IQ" improves. With advancements in diagnostic protocols and a plethora of treatment alternatives, our once-clear waters of treatment planning decisions have become a little murky. So what do we do with that "new patient" Monday morning?

Also, let us consider ourselves in the dental community. What do we want from our professional lives and practices? We know too well that dentistry is physically, intellectually and emotionally challenging. Most of us want to reap the satisfaction and reward of knowing that we have done the best thing for our patients. So, what is a "complete diagnosis"? What is the "best treatment"? Is it the best treatment that is currently available? Or is it the one treatment we know how to do best?

It has been said that we do not see the world, as it is we see the world as we are. So, in order for us to maintain our focus on a realistic picture, we must continue to grow and evolve as health care professionals. The best way to support that objective is to passionately pursue continuing education. The single best investment we can make in our practices is in ourselves and in our teams.

I have had the pleasure of participating in many different educational programs. This has ranged from local half-day seminars to multi-day international conferences attended by thousands of doctors. Included in my continuing educational experiences are university and institute-based learning centres. I have enjoyed lectures, workshops and hands-on participation courses. I have attended as both a "student" and a "teacher." Each forum has its own value, energy and merit. With rising educational costs, the questions become which one is right for you, your staff and your style of practice.

Whether we are studying dentistry or design, the more we become engaged in a subject, the more meaningful it becomes. Being immersed in a topic allows us to explore the material more fully, which leads us to a deeper level of understanding. Concepts begin to resonate within us. The ideas become part of us. "Mastery" is attainable.

So, what are the elements of an engaging educational experience? It varies from person to person, but here are some key issues to consider. Ideally, the number of doctors attending a program would be small enough to benefit from an intimate learning atmosphere, yet large enough for a variety of viewpoints. A sharing environment is much more conducive to learning. That is why a study-club forum can be so valuable. This would promote new networking opportunities among proactive, like-minded participants. Unlike some of our undergraduate experiences, the format should not be judgmental or punitive. And no matter at what level our experience or clinical skills, a good program invites us to plug in and advance to our next level.

The better educational programs present an opportunity for learning leading-edge information from master clinicians. A variety of different subjects would be discussed, but the topics would be held together with a congruent underlying theme. The consistency of hearing the same message, even in a different way, cannot be underestimated in our ability to learn. Multi-day, in-depth programs are more beneficial in this regard than one-day, superficial a la carte programs. A balanced curriculum would include both clinical and practice management topics. It would be designed to improve our diagnostic, treatment planning, clinical and practice management skills. Those areas of study are interdependent and only proficiency with all of them will advance our practices.

Study groups, which offer a hands-on component following a theoretical presentation, are superb. As dentists, we are very "hands-on" and learn especially well with the right hemisphere of our brains. For most of us, this is our visuo-spatial dominant side responsible for three-dimensional perception. This component of study literally rounds out our learning experience. "Live patient" programs provide an even more challenging learning experience by treating patients in a clinical environment. Studying in a real-life clinical situation accelerates the learning curve dramatically by extending our "comfort zone" in a supervised and supportive environment. Often, this interactive format provides an opportunity to see several different types of cases which illustrate a similar idea. This promotes a deeper internalization of the concepts and techniques. It makes the transition and implementation in our own practices much easier on a Monday morning.

Study clubs, which subscribe to a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to treatment planning, are the most beneficial to the general dentist. This enables us to see how all the disciplines of dentistry come together in harmony. Each of us has varying levels of comfort in performing certain procedures, but as we learn about the other disciplines it expands our thinking. This creates an appreciation and understanding for a comprehensive approach to patient care. It is imperative that we think in terms of what care is most appropriate for each of our patients. When we approach treatment planning from the standpoint that anything is possible...it becomes so.

An equally important partner, especially with indirect restorative dentistry, is the laboratory team. The laboratory brings our case designs to fruition. It is important for us to be able to visualize the completed case in our minds. It is equally important to be able to communicate that to the laboratory. Proactive labs will host in-house courses and often sponsor other educational programs that demonstrate how their work dovetails with our clinical appointments. As the quarterbacks of our patients' care, each restorative appointment has a laboratory preparation component to make the most efficient use of the

doctor-patient appointment. Our laboratories are a wealth of information and the study clubs, which provide them with a "voice," are to be commended.

The further we progress along our continuing educational journeys, the greater the benefit to our patients. We become more adept at bringing new patients into our practices. Our excitement inspires our teams, and ultimately motivates our patients who consistently hear and see our congruent message. This creates momentum for the doctor, the team, the patients and the entire practice culture. Our patients appreciate our involvement in continuing education because they are the ones who directly receive our improved care, skill and judgment.

The opportunity to participate in an intimate and interactive educational environment, which promotes a free exchange of ideas, is a great learning experience. It provides us with a chance to make a contribution while, at the same time, sharing with our peers. Forging and maintaining relationships with other participants is a terrific way of keeping on track. By staying in touch afterwards, it creates a sense of fellowship and accountability, and supports our community of practitioners. As we consider our investment in continuing education courses, study groups can be an extremely rewarding experience as we say a confident "good morning" to our new patient on Monday.

Dr. Joshua Charlat is an alumnus of the Dawson Masters Program and the Pankey Institute. He will be receiving his Fellowship in the Academy of General Dentistry this summer. Dr. Charlat is a member of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry and former clinical instructor at the Esthetics Program at SUNY in Buffalo. He is an ExperDent Study Group Leader in Toronto. Dr. Charlat's private practice is focused upon cosmetic and restorative dentistry. He can be reached at the Composium Dental Centre, (416) 415-2429, or drjjc@composium.com.

May/June 2001 Doctor of Dentistry