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(Editor's Note: If you have a clinical or practice management Pearl to share with your colleagues, send it to JCO, 1828 Pearl St., Boulder, CO 80302. Appropriate illustrations are welcome; a photograph of the author and a copyright transfer form are required prior to publication.)

A Charitable Way to Charge for Replacement Retainers

Like many orthodontists, I normally include an initial retainer in the total treatment fee. If a patient loses or breaks a retainer, a replacement is provided at one-half the usual fee of \$250 for a Hawley retainer and \$150 for a thermoformed retainer. I have always regarded this as a fair charge for time and materials.

One day I received a phone call from a patient's mother, who informed me that her child had lost her retainer and that she was disappointed that she would be charged for a replacement. She did not understand why I should "profit from her misfortune" after she had already spent more than \$4,000 on her daughter's treatment. She told me that she had two other children who would need braces in the future and that my policy made her consider switching to a different orthodontist. Needless to say, she got my attention. I agreed to waive the normal charge for a replacement retainer and said that we looked forward to treating her other children.

I then wondered how many other parents had decided to take their children elsewhere or declined to refer their friends to our practice as a result of our policy. I did not want to provide replacement retainers to everyone at no charge, nor did I want to drive away any potential business.

Every year, I contribute a significant amount of money to charities that are important to me. I thought, why not partner with my patients to give even more to these charities, while avoiding the appearance of profiting from my patients' misfortune?

My staff and I came up with what we call "Project Smile" (A). Any patient who loses or breaks a retainer is asked to write a check for the



cost of a replacement retainer to one of five selected charities. The patient is given a receipt for tax purposes. Each month, I add up the contributions and match them with my own checks.

Patients and parents have found this a more acceptable way of paying for replacement retainers. The charities are appreciative, and our practice has received positive local publicity for the program.

If you give money every year to charity, why not consider using this method to augment and direct your contributions? You might consider including the Foundation for Orthodontic Research, your dental school, or another dental-related charity on your list of choices. I welcome any inquiries or requests for assistance in implementing such a program.

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