

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

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Some Thoughts About Lifelong Learning

One of the greatest perks involved in being a professor of orthodontics is that, in an effort to expose our students to a wide range of treatment options, we ourselves get to see an incredible variety of philosophies, techniques, and outcomes. We recruit the best available clinicians, consultants, and researchers to speak to our students. For example, last month I sat in on a lecture by a practitioner who, at my invitation, was addressing my junior class. This particular orthodontist (I won't use his name to avoid embarrassing him too much) is well known on the West Coast as a genuine example of everything that is right about our specialty. His private practice is the envy of many of his peers: high quality, moderate volume, phenomenal referral base from both GPs and former patients, and a profitability that provides a wonderful lifestyle for him and his extended family. He is active in organized orthodontics and dentistry and contributes many, many hours to the board of directors of his local community college.

As I listened to his lecture, it became obvious to me that this was someone whom I wanted my students to emulate. I've seen enough of his finished cases to know that the outcome slides he was lecturing from really did represent what comes out of his office, and not just his selected best. As he modestly described his material, both my students and I were amazed at his unassuming excellence. It was such a matter of course for him that when I suggested that what he was presenting was incredibly exemplary, he acted as if I had complimented him for breathing. Excellence was simply second nature to him.

As my friend went through his lecture, he made frequent reference to little tidbits he had picked up at this course or that lecture. He spoke highly of his experience with Dr. Ron Roth's extended course in gnathology and orthodontics and the thirst for clinical excellence it instilled in him. He expressed a desire to take Dawson's course in occlusion, and he revealed his association with the Pankey Institute. His eyes sparkled when I brought up the Tweed Foundation. Nor had he limited his studies to orthodontics alone. He mentioned courses he had taken in periodontology. He had not only read or heard every author or lecturer I brought up relative to temporomandibular disorders, but he knew most of them personally. He demonstrated a more than passing familiarity with reconstructive dentistry. The more he spoke, the more I realized that over the years, he had made a huge investment in high-quality continuing education. This investment had obviously paid off.

Besides serving his local community college, my friend lectures at both the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles, where he has been on the volunteer faculty, both in orthodontics and occlusion, for the better part of a quarter century. He is well versed in the arts and literature. The man simply has a love of learning--whether he is doing the learning or the teaching. As long as the learning process is going on, my friend is ecstatic.

I thought of him recently when I had the pleasure of attending my oldest daughter's high school graduation. The ceremony was punctuated by the usual outbursts of youthful exuberance, excitement, and adolescent humor. One of the jokes made by the valedictorian was a satirical reference to the graduates' now being "critical thinkers and lifelong learners". All the kids in caps and gowns roared with laughter at this reference to what had become a trite cliché to them: the

concept of being trained to be lifelong learners. I couldn't help but think of my exemplary friend. I don't know for sure, but I would guess that he is in his late 50s or early 60s. I'm willing to bet he has been a learner for every bit of that time.

Of the 490 kids in my daughter's graduating class, maybe half of them will finish college. Of that number, maybe another 10-20% will go on to some professional school. Maybe one will become an orthodontist. It is my fondest hope that the love of lifelong learning that has made my friend such a great orthodontist has been instilled in that one classmate. It is the clearest road to excellence. •