

From need-based to want-based dentistry: Redefinition of a profession

Understanding the fundamentals of human behavior is a critical competency for practitioners.¹ Those who find the deepest satisfaction within their practice of dentistry are relentless in their pursuit of such understanding; understanding of themselves, their family and friends, employees, patients, and ultimately, the world community. Indeed, both personal and professional development require such understanding.

In his discussion of the general theory of human motivation, Abraham Maslow proposed a model of behavior based on a "hierarchy of relative prepotency," or as it is popularly known, a hierarchy of needs.² It says simply that before humans can aspire to higher levels of awareness, life quality, and creativity, basic needs must be met. The basic levels are physiologic. Once water and food are secured, individuals can turn to thoughts of other matters. Personal and family security usually comes next, followed by love and belonging, esteem, and finally pursuit of one's inner dreams toward what Maslow called "self-actualization." People at this level are living their dream, having peak experiences, following their life's passion; there are many terms for the creative, reflective processes that are the essence of fully functioning, self-actualized individuals. More and more people around the world are joining these ranks.

So how does this relate to dentistry redefined? As societies around the world have developed, elaborate systems of agriculture have removed the burden of growing our own food, and communities in which safety and security are provided have developed. Workers have generally begun to save resources over and above those required for food, shelter, and basic family needs, and the amount of *discretionary* income increases yearly among many of the world's population.

As disposable income increases, so do options about how to spend that income. In many societies, economic options for personal and self-improvement activities have emerged as a major factor. Included in this category are the image-related, *want-based* items, and dentistry is poised to deliver one of the critical components of appearance-related wants: attractive teeth that function well and last a lifetime.

Given that what is attractive varies from society to society as well as within societies, the evolution of adhesive restorative dentistry has yielded the opportunity for dentists to offer their patients preventive and restorative options that have predictably successful outcomes. Although the techniques for attaining a flawless, sealing "hybrid layer" in dentin are specific and unforgiving, when carried out correctly, porcelains and resin composites and the various hybrid mixes of tooth-colored materials can be strongly bonded to them. The beauty of such restorations is well-known around the world, and the demand for them is explosive.

It is this demand that I define as *want-based* dentistry. People all over the world want to look better and are willing to forego other priorities to attain that goal. The need-based practice of eliminating pain and infection, and of controlling contributing disease factors, remains the preliminary requirement for sequential comprehensive dental treatment. However, it is the rapid growth of the want-based, appearance-related dental treatments that stands to redefine our profession.

Consequently, I believe that successful restorative dentistry for the millennium will rest upon providing adequate, foundational, sequential, need-based dental care as a precursor to full-mouth, esthetic, adhesive, want-based oral reconstruction. This approach to practice is based on the patient-centered, comprehensive, sequential system detailed in last year's editorial series, "It's all in the sequence." It is predictably successful and results in well-served and satisfied patients. The redefined profession is looking good!

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Suggested readings

1. Wathen WF. It's all in the sequence: Professionalism. *Quintessence Int* 1997;28:361.
2. Maslow AH. *Motivation and Personality*, ed 2. New York: Harper and Row, 1970:chapter 5.