

Editorial

The amalgam controversy

Last month's editorial in *Quintessence International*, "The death of amalgam" and the opinion articles and statements following this editorial, were prompted by a television show. On December 16, 1990, CBS-TV ran a segment on "60 Minutes," narrated by Morley Safer and titled "Is there poison in your mouth?" The program was a devastating indictment of the use of silver amalgam restorative material by dentists.

For international readers, a little background is necessary. The mission of "60 Minutes" stories is such that information is frequently presented in an exposé-type format. The viewer is left with the impression that all sides of an issue have been addressed. Only the sceptical survive the onslaught.

Interviewed for the show were two anti-amalgam Canadian sheep researchers, an anti-amalgam dentist whose license to practice has been revoked, an anti-amalgam allergist, several miraculously cured (all anti-amalgam) patients, and a single, outgunned, pro-amalgam defender of the presently available scientific body of knowledge who represented the American Dental Association (ADA). As Ralph Katz says on page 243, it seems like everyone has to "choose a side." So did CBS-TV.

So powerful was the anti-amalgam message that I felt myself wondering if perhaps I still had amalgam under some crowns. And I wondered if I should call my arthritic mother and tell her to get her amalgam restorations removed. That was before I came to my senses.

In the story on amalgam, the information presented was as dramatic as the interviewer could make it while failing to present both sides of the issue. For example, the program highlighted dramatic testimony from patients who had been cured overnight of diseases such as multiple sclerosis, even reporting that one woman was able to throw away a walking cane the morning after removal of her amalgam restorations. No mention was made of the placebo effect, spontaneous remission, or other plausible explanations for improvement of these patients. No one whose amalgam restorations had been removed to cure disease, but unsuccessfully so, was interviewed. That would have ruined the story.

While the scientific evidence is incomplete at this

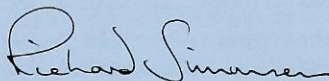
time, I would suspect that patients from the latter group (in whom amalgam restorations have been removed but the disease continues) outnumber those cured overnight by the thousands. The false hope given to victims of multiple sclerosis from this report was an unconscionable disservice to the public.

Particularly misleading was the interview with an anti-amalgam dentist whose license was revoked. The inference for viewers was that he was a martyr persecuted out of dental practice by the ADA. Unfortunately for the dentist in question, and for the credibility of CBS-TV, there is far more to this story than we were told. The truth of the matter was eloquently explained by Robert Baratz from Tufts University in a letter to CBS-TV. "Fraudulent behavior" was the problem in this case — not simply a difference of opinion over the problems with dental amalgam.¹

Scientific information to support the point of view taken by "60 Minutes" is *not* available. Unfortunately this was not made clear. Based on Mr Safer's last words, which I remind you were broadcast in the year 1990, one would tend to question where CBS-TV got their so-called facts: "And in Germany, legislation to ban amalgam has been introduced. A total ban is expected within the year." Even if he meant "a year" I will eat my lederhosen if Germany bans amalgam in 1991.

Since the writing of the March editorial, I received an interesting and lucid opinion piece by Ralph Katz, who draws parallels to the fluoridation issue. I then requested from other experts their views, or the statements of their universities, on the amalgam issue.

The following pages on the amalgam controversy provide for interesting reading in our pursuit of knowledge and increased understanding of this and other issues in dentistry today.



Richard J. Simonsen
Editor-in-Chief

1. Baratz RS: Witness in Berger case responds. *Am Dent Assoc News* 1991;22(1):4.