

## It's all in the sequence: Community health, education, and communications

One of the major reasons dentistry has advanced so rapidly as a valued service in many countries is the persistent message from many quarters that oral health is a vital part of general health. Underlying this and many other factors are the personal relationships dentists establish with their patients and communities. Successful dentists have recognized that community leadership is a vital component of a good dental practice. As a result, they have assumed leadership in improving and promoting the oral health of their patients and communities at large.

As in most successful ventures, only about half a dozen fundamentals comprise the successful community leadership endeavor.

1. The dentist and office staff must actively promote and protect the oral health of all individuals in their community.
2. The dental team must recognize the necessity and effectiveness of institutional and community-based programs that improve and expand access to oral health services to all members of the community.
3. Constant attention is required to identify current trends in the provision and financing of oral health care, and action must be taken to protect the best interest of the public's oral health.
4. Identification and utilization of various support sources for promoting oral health and preventing oral diseases are important for successful dental practices.
5. Active participation in legislative and regulatory processes are required for the profession to have a voice in developing oral health policy for our communities.
6. Constant, lifelong education for dentist and staff is mandatory to remain aware of contemporary epidemiologic and therapeutic findings that affect oral health.

Supporting these fundamentals are some subcompetencies, some of which may come naturally and some of which must be studied and practiced for optimal results.

1. Success in dental school and success in practice are often not correlated. Communication skills lie at the root of this paradox: enthusiasm and positive personalities are fundamental to success in any endeavor that involves other people.
2. The ability to attract and maintain patients rests more on interpersonal skills than on technical skills. There are opportunities to gain and refine basic interpersonal skills. It

is wise to hire staff who possess those skills or who are willing to work to obtain them. If we have negative attitudes and atmospheres in our offices, we are less likely to attract and retain patients.

3. Our technical expertise is essentially unappreciated by the patients upon whom we administer our painstaking art and craft. The emotional experience is what they remember when they leave. Take care that they will report positive experiences. If the work looks good (in *their* opinion, not yours) and they have no pain, the technique was a success in their minds. If you or your staff were negative or somehow offensive, the appointment was a failure in their minds, regardless of the technical outcome!

Activities outside the walls of a dental practice are also critical to ongoing success. Whether you call it public relations, community affairs, or marketing, our presence in the external community plays a large role in attracting new patients. That presence is also important in establishing the dentist and staff as oral health care experts in their respective communities.

There are dozens of opportunities for external activities that are both comfortable and fun for many of us. Many involve volunteer activities such as supporting youth sports programs, clubs, and religious and social organizations. Newspaper articles and radio and television talk and information shows are good venues for explaining oral health options and new therapies. All external activities add to the status of your practice (or detract, depending on their nature!).

A positive status tends to assure that local dentists will be called on to devise policy and procedure for issues of public health and various access programs. This presence is critical to the profession because nobody else has the broad knowledge to consider various ramifications of suggested approaches to public oral health. The dental team wins, the profession wins, and the public wins!



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