

Barbershop wisdom

I have learned a lot while getting my hair cut.

I have used the same barber for almost 20 years. I initially chose Mr Eberhart because of his hours. On a good Saturday, I can be on my way, tonsorially correct, by 7:10 in the morning. I stayed with him because of his professional expertise, but as a bonus, he's given me insights into what it takes to maintain a long-term successful practice.

It took a few years before I began to hear the stories of his work and how he had to adapt along the way. He has been at this a long time. A Texas native, he was a POW during the Second World War, then came home and went to barber college.

One of his ongoing challenges has been staying fit. We both have jobs with physical requirements that can have negative long-term effects on the body. Most dentists stopped standing years ago, and this added years to our professional lifespan. Mr Eberhart is still able to stand for long hours, in part because of a daily exercise regimen he has continued since the 1940s—a lesson I have yet to put into practice.

Part of his success comes from the pride he takes in his work. My first indication of the depth of his feeling came when he asked if he could take photographs of his work (my head). I must admit, I was taken aback but said yes when he told me that the purpose was to explain to his grandchildren what he did for a living. That made sense to me, and as a result, I made sure that my sons spent time working in my office.

Another lesson is that one must be able to adapt to change. He has seen boom and bust and learned

early to save his money to survive the lean times. He has also successfully made the transition from owning his own shop to working for someone else, a concept that many dentists find hard to embrace.

He also worries about the future of his profession and talks of the changes it has experienced. In his early days, the requirements for being a barber were rigid, and many failed to make the grade. At some point, the government decided that they wanted to decrease fees. The rules for entering the profession were relaxed to allow easier access and thereby increase the number of barbers. The theory was that an oversupply would bring down fees. Guess what. It didn't work. In fact, there were more barbers with the same number of heads to cut. So the barbers, who had to make a living, increased their fees. But something else happened. The new regulations also allowed them to perform services that once were not permitted. So then there were people who were less qualified, charging higher fees for services that they were not trained to do. As might be expected, this led to a diminution in the quality of service and ultimately, to a loss of prestige for his profession. Does this sound familiar?

A man can learn a lot while getting his hair cut.



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