

## It's all in the sequence: Professionalism III

### *Fundamentals of human behavior*

The last subcompetency under professionalism is an understanding of fundamental human behavior. This attempt to understand ourselves and others is a foundational skill for all human endeavors and is a critical part of a successful professional life. Without it, practitioners cannot achieve an excellent practice, nor can they achieve a successful personal life. The lack of interpersonal skills has doomed many doctors to a less rewarding professional life, so it is important to make a lifelong study of ourselves and our fellow citizens. In *Phaedrus*, Plato says, "Trees and fields tell me nothing; men are my teachers." So it is with our pursuit of understanding human behavior, and that understanding begins with one's self.

**Self-awareness.** If we ever hope to motivate patients and serve as experts to whom our community turns when questions about oral health arise, we must become exemplars of that which we wish to suggest to our patients. What we DO always speaks louder than what we SAY. Consequently, our first step is to develop our own philosophy of who and what we are as attending doctors. For example, if we are to suggest that our patients retain their teeth in the best possible form, function, health, and esthetics for a lifetime, we must begin with our own mouth and the mouths of all who work in our offices. Patients tend not to place high value on excellent oral health if doctors and staff have unhealthy teeth and gingival tissues.

The same point is to be made for systemic health. Humans cannot be healthy if they have bad teeth, gums, livers, hearts, or other ailments that detract from a healthy and active lifestyle. Mental and emotional health is equally important to a healthy, balanced life. Consequently, we should look for physical well-being through proper diet and exercise so as to promote a foundation for the rest of life's activities. Emotional well-being deals with the basic matter of distress, by using such tools as open-mindedness, tolerance, forgiveness, fairness, self-control, positive thinking, consideration for others—in a word, beneficence. That is the foundation of professionalism: consideration of patient well-being above self-interest.

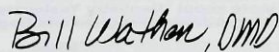
Personal and family security issues are also vital to self-awareness. As Abraham Maslow suggested, none of us can reach our full potential if we have not achieved personal and financial security. Therefore it is important to have a viable financial plan and to be following it. Attention to all of these things produces a more contented and satisfying life.

The health of one's practice is equally important to a satisfied and contented life. Topics like office efficiency and staff harmony, practice of a philosophy of service that is in harmony with one's core values, and the ability to communicate with staff, patients, and the communities we serve are among the most important aspects of a healthy practice. These attributes lead back to the self-assessment competency we discussed last month, and the ultimate basis of a healthy practice is lifelong learning and continuing education so that the practitioner can deliver excellent care to those who seek his or her services.

**Patient-awareness.** Once we get ourselves and our staff figured out, we can turn our attention to understanding our patients. As Sir William Osler once said, "It is more important for a physician to know what kind of patient has a disease than it is to know what kind of disease a patient has." This aspect of the professional life is critical not only for gaining patients' appreciation and acceptance of the necessary remedies for oral disease, but also for creating active referral sources for new patients.

Dentistry at this time in history, in many cases, has shifted from "need-based" to "want-based." Modern preventive practices have allowed many people around the world to achieve and maintain good oral health. Individuals with active oral disease are eager learners when exposed to the knowledge of how to be pain- and infection-free. The early part of patient assessment (the second basic dental competency, which we will begin to discuss next month), therefore, is to assess the physical, emotional, financial, oral, nutritional, and motivational status of the patient. The better we know our patients, the better we will be able to serve them. Hence, continual study of personality and behavior are fundamental to understanding the people we serve.

Understanding ourselves, our staff, and our patients allows us to interact in a more professional, tolerant, supportive, beneficent manner. All great doctors have mastered these fundamental concepts, and the faster we master them, the faster we will find growing satisfaction and contentment both in our family and our professional lives.



William F. Wathen  
Editor-in-Chief