

# Practice by Design or Practice by Default!?!

**S**OMEONE ONCE SAID, "The best way to predict your future is to design it yourself!" This is especially true of your dental career. You see, with your dental diploma, you have to work hard not to be successful – maybe.... You can often enjoy reasonable success just by showing up, as Woody Allen would point out. However, is "reasonable" success all you want, and do you want to risk the chance that you might not even achieve that? You may not be aware of it, but such notables as Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant died bankrupt despite all they appeared to have going for them....

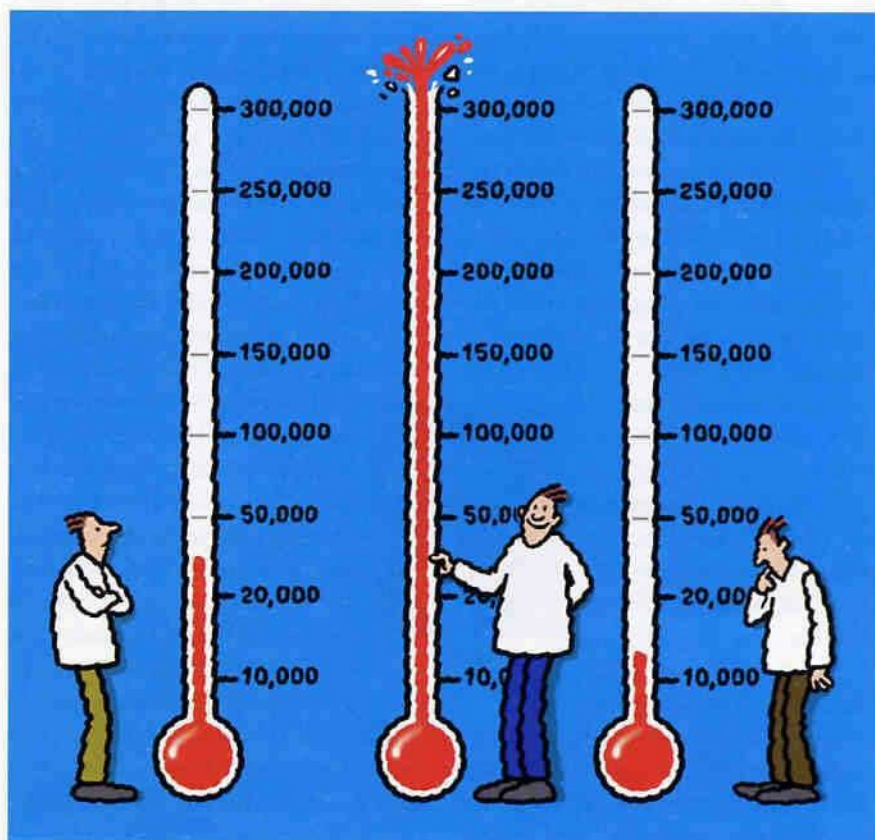
You can open your doors and be a truly "general" General Dentist and just take whatever patients walk in. After all, you do have to pay the bills.... But it is so easy to keep doing that and get comfortable in a silver lined rut. Then you



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wake up 20 years later with a hodgepodge practice. (In fact, that could be fine with you, but make sure that it was by choice and not by chance.) However, trying to be all things to all patients (cosmetics, extractions, a little ortho, etc.) is often inefficient and stressful – and can be non-productive.

A little proactive planning on your part could produce a much more satisfying prac-



tice in the long run. I'm not talking anything heavy here. For instance, what kind of practice style do you prefer: busy with high volume or a slower pace with less volume? Neither is right or wrong, and neither may be preferable over the other.

Consider the fact that you can get a car painted at Maaco for \$199 or at BMW for \$5,000. The customers of Maaco can't imagine that anyone is crazy enough to spend \$5,000 to get a car painted. Likewise,

the BMW customers can't imagine what kind of fool would think they could get a decent paint job for \$199. Both shops are busy, so there must be a market for both levels of service. And I'll bet that "Mr. Maaco" and "Mr. BMW" are both doing fine, thank you.

Dental practices run the gamut from high volume/low prices to low volume/high prices, and all the styles in between. I have clients at EVERY POINT

on the spectrum doing very well, and I know others at every point who are struggling. So do not develop preconceived notions about any practice style being inherently better than the other.

#### Consider the following:

A "boutique" cosmetic practice may appeal to you, but are you prepared to invest another \$50,000 – \$100,000 in post-graduate training and about that much again in extra equipment and materials? In addition to the clinical skills, do you have the communications (read "sales") skills to guide a patient to invest in a \$40,000 case? Even if you do, can you imagine how picky such a patient will be for the rest of your life?!! (Some of my cosmetic clients swear that those kinds of patients have the dentist on their speed dial button. You may be married to some of those cases a long time....)

If that kind of practice is your goal, then you need to get some good mentors and choose to associate with that kind of practice. If you start from scratch, then you need to start cultivating that kind of patient as soon as feasible. Over time, you need to be careful to avoid filling your schedule with non-productive procedures. It is easy to confuse "busy" with "productive". Needless to say, insurance can't play a major role in this kind of practice. Also, you have to feel comfortable serving that kind of patient in many cases. (There are exceptions, but this generally isn't your "good ol' boy" kind of atmosphere.)

At the other end of the spectrum, a high volume "general" practice can thrive if you are a high energy kind of person. If you are efficient, such a practice can be very financially rewarding, but it is very easy to get stuck in busy mode with high volume but low fees. Then it can be like eating soup with a fork – a lot of action but not much to show for it! In some cases such a practice can be doing simpler procedures and the overhead might be lower. You don't have as many headaches following up on complex procedures. You may not be written up in any journals, but life is simple. However, keep in mind that my analysis for the 2002 Den-

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This can be the problem if you rely too much on insurance.

tal Economics Survey showed that production can actually drop when you see more than about 55 patients per week! This is presumably as a result of not having enough time to devote to each patient or to their needs beyond immediate care.

Then there is the majority in the middle. They are doing a smattering of everything. On the one hand, the variety is interesting; but they can get frustrated that all of their patients don't seem equally interested in elective services they can offer. You often hear conversations about weeding out "C" and "D" patients who clog up the practice. But they do keep the book full—and a full book keeps the doctor off the staff's back. It's another matter again as to whether the office is just busy or productive.... Remember, "Every sale generates a revenue, but not every revenue generates a profit". This can be the problem if you rely too much on insurance.

There is a story about how to catch a certain kind of monkey. The hunter places a small cage in the path the monkey is known to frequent. A banana is placed inside the cage, but the cage is NOT directly for the monkey. Instead, the monkey comes

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down the trail and puts his hand into the cage to grab the banana, but the bars of the cage are too narrow for the banana to be removed. Rather than let go of the banana, the monkey will sit there for hours until the hunter comes by and drops a net on him! A lot of dentists have similar attitude about "firing" some patients, thinking that a non-productive patient in the chair is better than no patient at all! You forget that a lot of patients like that can wreck the schedule and fill up time that could have been used for a productive new patient. What usually happens if a patient finally agrees to a 5-unit bridge—but you can't see them for 2 months because the schedule is full?! Lost sale, that's what.

Regardless of your practice style, all you have to sell is time. Your financial success depends on how good your stewardship was over that time. First of all, you can put in more total time and/or you can get more out of each hour. While you are young and

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hungry, the brute force approach of putting in more hours is certainly one way to increase productivity. (Although that is debatable.) However, after awhile you begin to realize just how physically and emotionally draining dentistry can be; and most successful practitioners are interested in putting in less time, not more.

So you must turn to producing more per hour. Again, you can rely on raw speed and

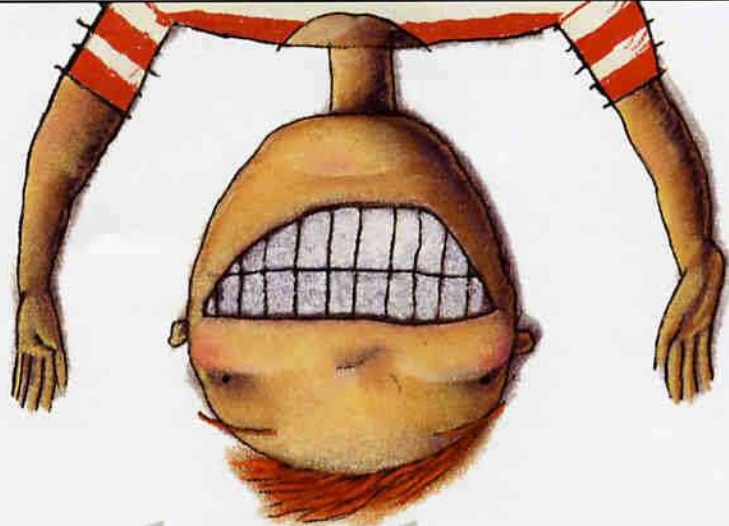
energy to do more per hour; or you can examine the nature of the procedures you do in that hour. As a professional, you should help the patient decide what is the best value for them—not necessarily for you. Whether a \$100 amalgam or an \$800 inlay is the best value is part of the discussion raging in the profession today. You will have to stake out your own position on that one.

In addition to your clinical speed and procedure mix, your level of fees is critical. You are concerned that your level of fees will drive patients away. Well, there is good news and bad news in that area. Study after study indicates that probably 90% of your patients love you. However, those same studies show that 90% think your fees are "a little high". The sad thing is that the patients think your fees are a little high whether you are charging \$400 for a crown or \$900! Cutting your fees does NOT seem to squelch that perception. So, I'd rather you be bold and charge a fair fee on the high side, if your patients are going to be sensitive anyway, yet keep coming back. Remember, patients are already driving past 5 dentists who charge less than you, but they still perceive value in what you deliver. So keep up the value and keep the fees at a level that is fair to both of you.

I find that many dentists are their own worst enemy. They are health care providers, not typically business people. They overreact to patient sensitivity regarding fees and are too afraid of rejection to present their finest dentistry as an option. As Dr. Pete Dawson would say, "It is not your job to sell the patient anything. It is simply your job to help them understand what they need."

So the future is in your hands. Either practice with a purpose or accept what is left over by default! ■

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