

Business is the Business of Your Business

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"I should have opened a hot dog joint."

Those words, spoken by a dentist in mid-career, raised a few eyebrows. While there is nothing wrong with owning and operating a fast-food restaurant, it's surprising to hear a successful professional expressing regret over his career choice. However, I suspect there are many dentists who can relate to the sentiment.

The stresses of the dental profession are easily imagined and well documented. We work in a demanding and precise field—microns matter—on patients who typically would rather be anywhere else. Our stereotypic reputation suggests that we are a necessary evil—we inflict pain for the good of our patients. But the stress we work under reaches far beyond clinical expertise and patient relations.

As reported in the December 2002, issue of *Illinois Dental News*, Dr. Gary Stough surveyed 14,000 dentists regarding stress in the dental practice. Not surprisingly, he concluded that stress is a major issue in the profession. Although, what was particularly noteworthy was that the *cause* of this stress was *overwhelmingly* related to the *business side* of dentistry. Not the dentistry, per se, but the business of being in business. Talk about a toothache!

Dental schools are in the business of producing excellent practitioners—men and women who are expert in diagnosing and treating dental disease. Both the dentist-in-training and his/her future patients agree on the importance of this. However, dentists-in-training are also becoming something else; they're becoming small business owners. Stough's research has to be seen as a wakeup call to dental schools.

To their credit, many dental schools are beginning see the importance of business training for their enrollees. But, what about the 152,000 dentists already in practice? What choices do they have? They certainly could register for some relevant business classes, hire a management consultant, accept an associateship to learn the ropes before soloing, or learn through trial and error.

But then what?

A well-trained dentist, even one with small business training, still has stress. Why? Because not unlike a restaurateur, small business owner, or even big company executive, they learn it can be tough work to run a business. There are overhead costs, personnel hiring and firing issues, staff development, OSHA demands, customer relations, time management issues, outside vendor relations, and more—and this is all *in addition* to insuring the satisfactory delivery of whatever products or services the business happens to be providing.

Yet there's more, because unlike others in business, dentists don't often seek advice and counsel from others. Confidants and

be to see that many of the problems you're facing are not yours alone.

- Read a novel, see a show, or go to a movie. As important as it is to focus on certain issues, it's even more important to purposefully NOT focus on them. What you need is perspective—and maybe a fresh set of batteries. Don't let your problems consume you; strive for personal and professional balance.
- Hire a coach. As the small business and corporate communities have discovered, coaches help you focus your thoughts, energies and attention.

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mentors are hard to come by, even in large group practices. A sounding board or think tank? Rarer finds still. So as a result, dentists tend to view themselves more like islands or isolated mountains, and it truly *is* lonely at the top. No wonder that hot dog joint seems like a good career move!

The good news is that agencies and organizations abound to help the professional out of serious professional, emotional or financial trouble. But a key question remains: How can this trouble be prevented in the first place? Here are some recommendations:

- Make a point to network within the profession. Attend ADA, state, and local dental society meetings to find out how others are dealing with these issues.
- Make a point to network outside of dentistry. Join your Chamber of Commerce, or Rotary or other such group. The more time you spend with other entrepreneurs the easier it will

Unlike friends, they don't decide what's best for you. And unlike family, they're not invested in keeping things status quo. A properly trained coach has your best interests in mind and helps you understand exactly what you need to be your best.

- Make a list of a dozen, or 25, or 1,001 things you *could* do to help yourself. And then do a few of them. And then do a few more. See what works and what doesn't and modify the list accordingly.

Dentistry—running a successful dental practice, that is—is far more than just the diagnosing and treating of dental disease. Yet far too many dentists are overwhelmed by the business side of the business and as a result, suffer incredible stress and strain. Don't let this incessant burden get the best of you any longer. You know what you need to do. Now go do it!

Just be sure to do it with a smile so we can all see those pearly whites!