



Year One Dental Visit — For Whose Benefit?

My granddaughter recently celebrated her second birthday, and she was long past due for her first dental visit. She is a first child for her parents, and as I wanted her and her parents to develop a long term relationship with a younger practitioner, I decided not to see her myself, but rather, to refer her for her first dental experience. However, before I gave my daughter the practitioner's telephone number, I decided first to call myself to inquire about the office's infant care program. I selected a person who had graduated ten years previously, not too old to be behind the times, yet not too young to be inexperienced. What I thought would be a routine call became, to my dismay, a great disappointment. This is what I was told: "We don't see children until they are at least two and a half or three years of age. The parents in my practice are upscale. They would not let me examine their children if they were crying. And if I wouldn't examine the child, how could I charge a fee? I couldn't charge just for giving advice. And I am not going to see infants free of charge. After all, I don't run a charity clinic...."

Surely those comments do not represent the views of most pediatric dentists. Yet, at a time when we are debating with pediatricians in regard to the proper timing of a child's first dental visit, it is important to recognize that there are still pediatric dentists who will not examine a child until the age of three. It is also important to ask why this is so — why pediatric dentists, trained to handle children, would be reluctant to examine an infant. The person I called thought an infant care program would be a net cost to the practice, but that was a narrow-minded view and simply just an excuse. An appropriate fee should be charged for a brief (perhaps 15-minute) appointment. However, even if no fee were charged, there could be no better way to build a practice than to establish good rapport with new parents. They would leave the office with good feelings about the practitioner and would be sure to tell friends with young children about the positive experience they had. In the July/August letter to the editor

(page 342), Berman suggests that he would even prefer to meet briefly with expectant parents to give them needed health information. I know of other practitioners who send health information to parents of newborns, whose names they obtain from local newspapers.

Critics have suggested that infant oral health programs with the age one dental visit were established to solve the busyness factor as dental caries decreased. Actually, most practitioners are too busy, and the age one visit is advocated as a way to prevent the occurrence of the all too prevalent early childhood caries. In the May/June letter (page 197), Casamassimo refers to the roughly 2.5 million American children under four years of age with dental caries. In this issue, Thaler writes (page 468) that 3/4 of his 400 new patients each month have dental caries. Annually, more than 300,000 children in the U.S. are sedated for dental treatment. Imagine the benefit to those children had their parents been involved in an early infant care program!

Perhaps some practitioners are not comfortable holding an infant. They lacked such experience in their training programs, and they did not keep up with new developments in our specialty. Perhaps some fear the crying infant. It is different and strange to them. They worry that they are not in control and that parents will think they are not competent if the infant cries. My colleague handles the situation well when he tells parents not to worry, for although the infant is not ready for the quick examination, his teeth are.

It has been an uphill battle to get all health professionals to accept the Year One Dental Visit. Part of the problem is that there are still pediatric dentists who are not convinced of the value of that visit. While it is good to discuss and to debate, it is now time for all members to accept the guidelines of our Academy and to promote the Year One Dental Visit for the benefit of the children we serve.