



All in a Day's Work: The Dynamic Challenges of Pediatric Dentistry

On occasion, I feel that all of us need to reflect upon our exceptional specialty of pediatric dentistry and the many challenges that we constantly face. As with so many of you, I, too, am attempting to deal with the tidal wave of early childhood caries. However, I had a number of incidents occur that emphasized to me, once again, that we are the “pediatricians of oral health” and have responsibilities of care far beyond restorative and surgical procedures.

My pediatric dental practice is located in a city of approximately 150,000, 60 miles north of Toronto. Toronto is a large city of 2.5 million, about the size of Chicago. I am fortunate to have admitting privileges for my pediatric patients in 2 local hospitals. My situation does not seem much different than that of other pediatric dentists, but on occasion I have been called upon to play roles atypical of my day-to-day routine.

A uniformed police officer arrived dressed in a bullet-proof vest and armed with a subpoena for my compulsory court appearance. I was summoned to testify as an expert witness by the crown (district) attorney. I had treated 2 children under general anesthesia in hospital due to extensive early childhood caries. These children were “wards” of the Children’s Aid Society (CAS). The parent of these children had been charged with criminal assault causing bodily harm, abuse, etc. I was on the stand for 1.5 hours testifying and being cross-examined by the prosecutor and lawyer for the defense. My testimony was a key component to the proceedings that enabled the abuse charges to be enforced and the children’s lives protected.

On another occasion, 2 police officers arrived from our provincial (state) police services. Both were detectives from the Serious Crime Section and the Cold Case File Unit that you see portrayed on A&E Television. One of the teenagers that I had treated a number of years ago was allegedly involved in contract murder. This young individual disappeared a few years ago. The police felt that he probably was murdered himself. In my “previous life,” I was a dental officer in the Canadian military and received forensic odontology training at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington DC. The police officers were inquiring as to whether I had enough dental documentation to identify this individual from remains that were

found. A forensic report was submitted emphasizing crucial points for identification purposes.

On another day, I was doing a recall examination on a 15-year-old female patient that has been in my practice for the past decade. She appeared to be particularly pale and had recovered from infectious mononucleosis 6 months previously. She claimed that she was having problems eating and was vomiting after breakfast and lunch. After an in-depth conversation, she felt that she was “overweight and did not like her appearance.” This young woman is a pleasant, attractive, and an introverted individual who was not obese. It became readily apparent that she was probably showing signs of bulimia and/or anorexia. I reviewed this condition in depth with the young woman, using the story of Princess Diana’s struggle with the disease. I received permission to contact her family physician. The physician was most appreciative of being alerted, and was unaware that the adolescent had problems in this area. The physician made arrangements to see her immediately. She has since been referred to an eating disorder clinic to undergo counseling. Remarkable improvements have since taken place.

Last week, while sitting in the barbershop, my pager was activated. I contacted the number on the pager. It was the legal counsel of a general dentist from another city who had assault charges pending because of alleged inappropriate use of a pediatric restraining device (Papoose Board). The lawyer was asking me to review the case and give him an opinion regarding the allegations.

I have relayed these various incidents to readers to once again show how challenging, dynamic, and diversified our specialty of pediatric dentistry has become. As the experts in children’s dentistry, pediatric dentists are the “pediatricians for oral health” of our patients. And yes, *we can truly make a difference in many of our patients’ lives that goes far beyond basic dental services.*

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