

A Path in the Forest

There are many paths in the dental clinical forest that one can follow. We must be open to looking down as many of those paths as possible as a way to evaluate whether the path we choose is the right one for us.

Because of a chance encounter at an Operative Academy meeting, I was able to peer down one path, and that path has become a quest for my excellence in dentistry. At a meal in Chicago, IL, USA with an outstanding dentist from Boulder, CO, USA and a dental classmate of his from Olympia, WA, USA, a conversation ensued that nearly ended in verbal fisticuffs. The cool headed composure of the wife of the dentist from Olympia saved us from embarrassment. The topic of conversation was whether or not to cover a cusp with a gold casting (basically, inlay vs onlay). Can you believe it? Here I was, involved in a heated, emotional debate over a clinical question. I was involved in a debate over a clinical question that nearly reached a proportion equal to a debate that I witnessed at another Academy meeting in Chicago the previous year, which actually made me resign from that academy, because of the personal attacks I witnessed in the open debate forum.

The thing that surprised me most about the dinner encounter was the depth of my feeling for the subject. Where did that passion come from? What prompted me to argue with a dentist whom I had never met before, over a subject that, my only ammunition was dental school experience and a few years in solo general practice? In public, no less.

As a result of that "dinner conversation," I ended the following year taking a week-long course at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA, learning the art of fine gold castings. At that course, I found what made the most sense about restoring a damaged tooth compared to anything I had learned in the previous 14 years. The Zen in me says that I was really ready for the experience.

It was at that point that I recognized improving my operating skills would not occur at a meaningful rate without help. I needed a vehicle in which to take the trip. The vehicle turned out to be an operating study club. The motivation to develop a local operating club came out of pure necessity to keep from having to trav-



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el great distances with instruments and patients to get the help that I needed. The mentored study club has proven to be my steady reference for quality and excellence in my dentistry.

Early in my dental journey, I read an interview Dr LD Pankey had with Earl Nightingale. Dr Pankey was asked why so many of the pictures in his office showed the same folks. His answer related his teaching to not being unlike that of a golf coach to a professional golfer. The golfer on the tour returns to his coach regularly for instruction on perfecting his game. The player wants to get better, and the coach is motivated to make him a better player. That made lots of sense to me.

Improving my "gold casting game" came in the form of becoming a member of an operating study club. My diagnosis, preparations, impressions and delivery performance for a gold casting are put on the line in the study club environment. My mentor coaches me toward an improved outcome. No ego thing here, just a coach with far more experience than I have, sharing

his knowledge to make me do a better job for my patient. And isn't it the patient whom we are here for?

We, as dentists, are not very different from any other profession. As members of the Operative Academy and individual study clubs, we must be committed in a way that makes sense to us individually, to continuously improve our skills for the benefit of our patients.

Being part of an operating study club has been the avenue that has provided me with the greatest skill improvement and personal satisfaction than any other

form of continuing education I have ever experienced. This path to excellence in dentistry has entwined all aspects of my life. My family, my patients, and I hope my study club peers have all gained real benefit from that involvement.

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Lineangle Notes, Newsletter of the
Academy of RV Tucker Study Clubs