INTERVIEW

with — Prof. Edward A. McLaren

Nathalie Schüller for Dental Tribune International: Prof. McLaren, you began your career as a general practitioner. What sparked your interest in esthetic dentistry and dental design? What were your influences? Perhaps a mentor?

A: I was always interested in dentistry as a child. After I became a general dentist, I gravitated toward treating more complex cases very early on and I wished to specialize. In practicing, I really enjoyed most the artistic aspect of what I was doing and I became involved in esthetic dentistry naturally, because of the interest in that.

I had the opportunity to see the work of master ceramist Willi Geller when I was in dental school; it was something I had never seen or experienced in dental school—it had not even been talked about—and it really motivated me. If I had two mentors, one would be a dentist, Dr. John Sorensen, and the other a technician, Klaus Müterthies; they took me under their wings and motivated me to do what I do.

But like anything, one has to have some level of passion. I have always enjoyed working with my hands and the aspect of esthetic dentistry relating to art is appealing to me. Things evolved and pathways opened for me and I just sort of ended up where I am, but it was always something that I was fascinated with.

Q: How important is it to stay up to date with technological advancements and developments in the field? What does the future hold for esthetic dentistry?

A: I read a fascinating book in the early nineties about technological changes and the need to stay current. In those days, technology was revolutionizing every three to five years, and I think that it is even happening at a faster pace now. The author emphasized that adult education was important to maintain one’s job and retain the ability to function as jobs evolved.

Regarding the future of esthetic dentistry, the major movement is toward a minimalistic approach. The materials are improving every day. Right now, I do not envision any fundamental changes in the short term other than incredible improvements in what we already have and possibly the ability to do 3-D printing of a very complex colored ceramic restoration, which will not necessarily affect dentists per se, but will affect esthetic dentistry.

Chairside dentistry is growing, but we have to adapt to it, change what we do to make it work. As a doctor, our job is not to adapt to a technology; our job is to diagnose the patient and find out what is the best technology available to the patient and then adapt the technology to the patient. Unfortunately, I see it done the other way.

Q: What initially prompted your involvement in the Clinical Masters™ Program, and what has encouraged you to continue your participation? What do you perceive to be the main benefits of the program for dental professionals?

A: The Clinical Masters™ Program has the ability to stay current. The team behind the program work with people who have state-of-the-art institutes around the world. They have the ability to move quickly if certain instructors are moving up the knowledge ladder and have the ability to give more current or applicable information to practitioners. These are really the benefits of these programs. Dental Tribune International as a publishing company has the ability to market well. This synergy makes it work: having the right faculty, facilities, current materials, company
partners, as well as a publishing company that can adequately and exceptionally market these courses. In the end, all those things figure in to making a great Clinical Masters™ Program.

Q: Is that what appeals to you about the Clinical Masters™ Program? You are certainly busy and do enough traveling not to have a need to come all the way to Europe.

A: Yes, I love teaching, but the hopping in airplanes is getting really old. As one goes through one’s career, one spreads oneself and moves in every direction. After a while, one comes to a phase in which one falls in with a specific group, like working with Yannis Roussis in Greece and Dental Tribune, who consistently do a great job of sponsoring programs and putting on programs. As one human being one can only do so much, so one ends up gravitating to the people who have success, who have staying power. I want to be a teacher to do what I do and let other people who have the expertise and determination, like Dental Tribune, do what they do best. I think that is the best way to marry these things. I am a professor at a university and most universities generally do a poor job at postgraduate education; a private company like Dental Tribune has to stay current or it would not stay in business.

Q: When I see presentations on esthetic dentistry and the possibilities, I wonder how much more can be achieved; how can the industry go beyond what is already possible. Are you constantly surprised by the new techniques and possibilities that arise?

A: It seems that there has been incremental improvement of what we already had. Obviously, the major achievement that has most impressed people is implants and the improvements there. I would say IPS e.max is a revolutionary material, a really high-strength glass-ceramic, and it appears that we are also going in that direction with zirconia, gaining more translucent zirconia. Those are probably the two areas of materials that have developed pretty well. I would caution the reader though that we do not have any long-term clinical data for any of these materials, so while they do look better, we just do not know if something is going to work as reported until we have a few years of experience using them.

Q: You teach photography as well. It is an important tool when making a presentation at a congress or showing a patient the envisioned treatment outcome. Does it also help the dentist achieve what he or she needs to do or is it more for the patient, when the dentist needs to explain or present something?

A: Photography and cameras have evolved so much. Visuals have very high impact for people: a picture is worth a thousand words—I think it is worth 10 billion words if it is the right picture. Any dentist performing esthetic dentistry or anybody educating a patient does not need to become a master, but definitely needs to become a reasonable photographer. I am constantly surprised and it bothers me a little bit that, when it comes to esthetic dentistry, I see so many people teaching portrait classes, really cool classes in which they are painting lips and so on, taking interesting shots, great pictures, artistic to put on one’s wall, but relative to educating a patient, I would hope that how to take good dental images should be the focus.

Q: You mentioned to me that you are passionate about what you do. Tell me why. Is it because of what it brings to you, what it brings to others, or both?

A: Yes, I mentioned to you that I am one of the more unidimensional people you will ever meet. I think, dream, have nightmares, 24 hours a day about teeth; it is in my consciousness. One just finds something one is passionate about, like an artist who is passionate about his art. When he has free time, that is what he does. When I have free time, I make teeth. It is fun for me; it puts me in a special state of mind.

Life is a long process and it would be horrible to hate what one does for one’s whole life.

Q: You do your own ceramics. Would you say that you are a perfectionist or an artist in your own way?

A: I would like to define myself as an artist. The more I do that, the more artistic I feel, the more passion I feel toward esthetic dentistry and designing smiles. First of all, one needs to define oneself in a certain way. A musician is someone who just plays music, even if she is not very good at it. It really does help one’s mindset, because we tend to be self-negative. If one truly wants to be something, one has to start seeing oneself doing it.

Q: Is creating your own ceramics also because the results you envision are difficult to relate to others or it is difficult to let someone else do it for you?

A: I would not recommend dentists learn to do ceramics themselves. Like anything else, it takes five to ten years to become pretty good at it. I do it just because—and this applies generally to the things that I do—it is the thing that gets me into the most peaceful state. When I am with patients, sometimes I am stressed, the phone is ringing, so even though I love doing that, when I sit down and create ceramics, it just puts me in such a state of bliss. That is what I enjoy most about it. Many dentists take my course thinking they want to save money by not paying a ceramist; well, that is the worse reason to do it. It has to be something that one is passionate about. What makes a good esthetic dentist? Someone who likes art, whether doing the teeth himself or herself, as composites, or having to evaluate what is good and bad dental art. That requires a certain personality. Some people have it, some do not and one just needs to be honest with oneself. It is about finding something that does not feel like work when one is doing it; one just enjoys it.

“Any dentist performing esthetic dentistry definitely needs to become a reasonable photographer.”