An iconic icon

Recognizing today’s dentists who have devoted time outside their practice to help others

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Each generation has a different concept or image of an icon of contemporary culture. D. Walter Cohen is such an icon of dentistry. He is a pinnacle of energy and accomplishment with a glimmer of idealism. Even today, in his 80s, he will play tennis early in the morning before he practices periodontics at his office.

He endorses the “gestalt” of life. For example, he talks about Dr. Harry Sicher, author of Bone on Bones: Fundamental of bone biology, as not only being a great orthopedist but someone who loves music and catching butterflies as well.

Cohen makes the time and effort to change the lives of others and to encourage peace through education and understanding. Sharing his vision through unselfish seeds of giving, Cohen fertilizes the seeds with education and an interchange of knowledge.

With his nurturing, the seedlings grow into trees with strong roots and wide branches with spreading leaves. It is underneath the shade of these leaves that people learn and share knowledge.

He even manages to open eyes and ears that have been waxed shut through years of prejudice and ignorance.

In 1997, Cohen established the D. Walter Cohen Middle East Center for Dental Education in Israel at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University. Today, it continues to set the tone of learning for citizens all over the world.

It also allows for the exchange of dental students at Hebrew University with the students at the Al-Quds School of Dentistry in Jerusalem. This exchange illustrates true sharing between Israeli and Palestinians in Jerusalem by stressing knowledge, human compassion and understanding.

Cohen is a passionate man who has given the world a real opportunity to enhance peace efforts and change humanity through education and understanding.

Cohen is also helping to make strides in lowering the number of preterm, low birth weight babies. He is guiding the treatment and care of periodontal disease during pregnancy, especially among pregnant teenagers.

This may be a major step in order to lower the number of preterm, low birth weight babies. A favorite phrase of his is that “we have to keep trying so we can break through the glass ceiling.”

Cohen helped establish the University of Pennsylvania’s first department of periodontics and served as its first chair. Growing from professor to dean, Cohen advanced new concepts and raised educational standards.

During his career he has found the time to write and publish 22 books and hundreds of articles. Despite his busy schedule, he always finds the time to participate as dean emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Dental Medicine.

Among his many honors, he has received the Legion of Merit from France, was named president of the Medical College of Pennsylvania, chair of the Pennsylvania Diabetes Academy, president of the National Museum of American Jewish History and chancellor emeritus of Drexel University College of Medicine.

These are just a few examples of the awards and leadership recognition that he has received.

When I asked Cohen what he considered his greatest achievement to date, he unhesitatingly replied “my family.” His daughters would probably agree.

Proudly, he related the wonderful family home in which he was raised, and that his father was the first periodontist in Philadelphia. As he related it, the encouragement and love that his family gave to him made it easy for him to give so much back.

If the question were posed to me as to who and what is an icon in dentistry, I would swiftly reply, “D. Walter Cohen.”

‘Dr. D. Walter Cohen makes the time to enhance the lives of others and to encourage peace through education and understanding.’

Limit staff access to drugs

Dental offices and the pharmaceuticals used there present the risk for drug abuse, but dentists can put policies in place that help reduce the chance of illegal use of controlled substances, according to an article in an issue of Anesthesia Progress (2009 edition, 56:112–113).

Joel M. Weaver, DDS, PhD, writes that dentists who place too much trust in their employees make themselves and their practices vulnerable to people who abuse controlled substances.

Dentists who regulate drug access and distribution are protecting more than their practice—they’re also protecting their patients, employees, and reputation.

While it’s often easier to stick with the way things have traditionally been done, making a few changes to drug access policies makes good business sense, Weaver says.

“Although change is difficult and usually meets with resistance, the thoughtful practitioner who can step back and observe his or her practice for potentially fatal weaknesses will be much less likely to succumb to a disaster,” Weaver writes.

Accredited hospitals already have strict rules to help prevent drug theft, but private unaccredited offices without mandatory controls are highly vulnerable to drug theft and deception.

By taking sole responsibility for storing, filling and handling syringes with controlled substances, dentists reduce the chance for illegal drug use and mistaken dosages.

It’s important to rely only on those licensed to handle medications, Weaver says, such as physicians, dentists, nurses and pharmacists. Other employees who receive on-the-job training also may be more likely to make mistakes with drug dosages and concentrations.

“Who should have access to controlled substances in the dental office? The answer is simple: only licensed professionals and as few of them as is reasonable,” he says.

For more information on limiting prescription drug access, read the entire article, “Who Should Have Access to the Controlled Substances in Your Office?” at: www2.allenpress.com/pdf/anpr-56-4fnl.pdf.

(Source: Anesthesia Progress)