Six rules that I have learned in my life as a dentist

By Richard J. Reinitz, DDS, MBA, FAGD

Rule #1: There is no substitute for education and experience

All dentists are created equal when we graduate. From there, the differentiating factor comes with advanced training, continuing education, and a willingness to continue to learn and experiment. The greatest lessons we learn come from our failures.

When I was in general practice residency at the Veterans Administration in Philadelphia, my mentor, Dr. Alan Samet, taught me a vital lesson. As I struggled with my first impacted third molar—and ultimately had to be rescued by the senior resident—Dr. Samet watched in bemusement. After the patient was dismissed and I had been criticized by a senior resident for my mistakes, I sat slumped in front of Dr. Samet. He asked what I had learned. With absolute honesty, I told Dr. Samet that I now understood the valuable art of the referral!

The memory of my failures has made me a better dentist, one who is more humble and more aware of his limitations. Success is great but it is also a tonic. Success can make you believe that you can do things that you should not do. A little reality can go a long way.

Rule #2: It's always about the money

When I was still in my prosthodontic residency, I began moonlighting with only an assistant and no front desk person. The office had large floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the parking lot. A nicely dressed new patient came to see me, and following a full series of X-rays and a complete examination, I presented her with my treatment plan. I believe the total for the treatment plan came to approximately $2,000. She had insurance, so the total would have been reduced by the insurance benefit. But after telling me the cost was prohibitive, she left the office.

Being the dentist as well as the front desk attendant, I watched as she entered her car, a top-of-the-line new Mercedes with the temporary license plates still visible. In seeing this, the message I received was that she did not value dentistry as highly as she did her mode of transportation.

I think each of us has probably experienced similar situations or has been presented with patients demanding that we treat them according to their maximum insurance benefit. Some dentists might contend that we have to make patients understand the value of good oral health. But the volume of what a patient hears is directly proportional to the position dentistry ranks in the patient’s value system.

Rule #3: You have to care

A family friend, who had a son who was to attend medical school, had a question. Given the choice between two physicians—one who was clearly a recognized leader in his field but with little or no ‘bedside manner,’ or one who was quite rare and possessed excellent bedside manner—this aspiring doctor wanted to know which physician my wife and I would prefer? Both of us said the second physician. My friend’s son was shocked at our answer and fully expected us to choose ‘the best.’ He asked why.

We told him that treatment of a patient is not limited to mechanical diagnosis and treatment. A patient must believe that the person caring for him or her is not only knowledgeable but cares whether the patient gets better or not.

A belief in one’s caregiver is as important as the technical success of the treatment. We have all had what we consider successful cases but unhappy patients because we failed in our bedside manner. When a patient believes that his or her physician or dentist does not care or believes that money is the primary concern, the patient will get angry, and find fault—whether fault exists or not.

Rule #4: Let go

When I first went into private practice, I micromanaged everything, and became angry when a team member had to take time off for illness, a sick child, or any other reason. It was not that I was mean. I had large bills to pay, and when team members did not work, my job became more difficult. Ultimately, this situation affected daily production.

I wish I could tell you when I had my epiphany. But one day I realized that my team members had lives of their own. I have been fortunate to have had the privilege of hiring and being able to keep a team together for many years. The team members know their jobs and responsibilities.

At the same time, you must recognize the need to invest in new equipment and training that will improve your practice. Also, the biggest factor in the production of revenues is operating efficiency. You only have a certain amount of time each day, so you must maximize the use of this time.

Rule #5: Remember, it is a business

It would be nice to think of our practices in terms other than just money. But—quite simply—if our expenses outpace our revenues, we will not be calling ourselves anything except bankrupt. You should have an employee manual to address issues like job descriptions, expected work hours, and benefits. Keep a close eye on accounts receivable, and try not to over-commit to the latest must-have ‘toys.’

Rule #6: There aren’t any rules

You must be guided by your principles and ethics. In other words, you need to do what you think is right. But there is no harm in learning from others. Also, there is no need to ‘reinvent the wheel.’ If you have a chance to enter into an agreement with an associate that looks promising, then do so.

Don’t rush into a solo private practice. While a solo private practice has the advantage of your being the boss, it also means you have sole responsibility for everything from patient care to the water bill. When something goes wrong, every one will expect you to solve the problem because ‘you are the boss.’

Even if you have no better idea of how to rectify a situation than anyone else, that is immaterial. You should shoulder the burden alone. People often say to me how lucky I am since I am my own boss and can set my own hours. The reality is that, while all that is true, I also am responsible for my patients, team, the lab, my family, and myself. That responsibility can create much worry and anguish as well as much joy.

My final piece of advice is to find people with whom you share that worry and joy. If you can build a warm and caring environment in your practice and at home, you will have a support system that allows you to succeed.

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