When I was a dental student lots of years ago, we all used to read stories by Damon Runyon, from which the musical Guys and Dolls was derived, and one of the characters we really liked was known as Mr Nicely-Nicely Jones. He was always smiling, and everyone liked him. Whenever anyone asked how things were going, he would respond: “Nicely, nicely.” They especially liked him because he had the rather endearing trait of being able to eat many pies in one sitting, and a good bet could always be had by his associates as to just how many he could devour. Unfortunately, despite his moniker, he carried a gun and was known to have despatched several nice citizens.

A current play at the National Theatre is entitled English People Very Nice, where the characters depicted generally aren’t very nice at all, so I have become a tad suspicious of anything “nice”. Despite the fact that I have met some stinkers, cads, bounders and rotters in my time, the British are generally known to be “nice”, a nation that prides itself on “good” behaviour and consideration for others. There is a problem to this epithet, however – it is used too frequently. This creates a certain laziness of phrase: instead of describing someone with meaningful words such as kind, considerate, decent, intelligent and wise, we say they are “really nice”. The converse is also true: when we talk of the aforementioned stinkers, cads, bounders and rotters, the most commonly used descriptive phrase is that they are really “not very nice”.

There are other problems associated with being nice. Niceness is often associated with blandness, and I would generally prefer to be called anything other than nice (and have indeed been)! A recent survey has highlighted the fact that “nice” people earn on average £1,500 less per annum than others who are more aggressive or even nasty. Does this have significance in the context of dentistry? Not really. Patients will attend a dentist who is nice to them, but will avoid one who is not very nice – in fact, being not very nice is often the precursor to a complaint being lodged. So, one phrase that a dentist who is not very nice could learn to employ is “I’m sorry that you did not have a good experience here today, but I will try to ensure a better one next time” or a more succinct version of this.

Although the two words “nice” and “good” are often used in similar contexts, they are by no means interchangeable. A dentist can be nice but not good, and equally the converse. Now, here lies the conundrum: it is extremely easy for a patient to know whether a dentist is nice, but not whether they are good at their job. The consequence of this may be that dentists doing poor work but who are nice to their patients are far less likely to have complaints levelled against them than dentists who are good at their job, but lack the ability to relate easily with their patients. From this, we may reasonably come to the conclusion that it is better to be nice than good. Being good, however, raises another problem; is “good” good enough in dentistry? There may not be a simple answer to this, and it really rather depends on the expectations of those paying the bills, whether patient or employer. If a payee believes they have got value for their money, then good may sometimes suffice, but the more they spend, the greater the expectation.

Remember the immortal words uttered by Gerald Ratner when he was addressing the CBI. He was asked how it was possible to sell a piece of jewellery at lower cost than a Marks and Spencer’s prawn sandwich, and he responded by saying that his goods were “crap”, and would not last as long. Now, crap is not a nice word, and while until then the public was prepared to buy his goods in large quantity, they were not prepared to do so when he appeared not to be nice. His business went down the tubes as if slurped by high-speed suction. It behoves us therefore to ensure that we do not make a similar mistake. Be good, or even better, very good, but just as important, be nice – unless you want to earn £1,500 pounds per annum more than you do.

Ed Bonner considers
The case for… and against
Being nice and good

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