Why orthodontists should be holistic

By Dennis J. Tartakow, DMD, MEd, PhD, Editor in Chief

Orthodontics is holistic dentistry. Surely that is correct. We, as prudent orthodontists, do not just treat a malocclusion; we treat a human being who happens to have a malocclusion.

This is a mind-body-spirit unity, and orthodontists are unique among professionals in this respect. Attorneys compose legal opinions while accountants get to the bottom line of a balance sheet. However, an orthodontist who does not treat the patient as a whole (holistically) misses the entire point of being a doctor.

These observations are not new concepts; the doctor-patient relationship is omnipotent. Bad relationships can do actual harm. Who would doubt that patients who trust their doctors are likely to do better than those who don't?

A sympathetic and compassionate doctor is more likely to be diagnostically and therapeutically accurate. Practicing as holistic doctors, we understand that patients have contexts, and the contexts matter need to be understood.

Often the whole family of a young orthodontic patient will need to be in the mix of a patient's treatment for a successful result to occur; the orthodontist is the go-between to the whole nexus in which his or her patient is treated successfully or not.

We might have a duty only to the patient, but in order to properly fulfill that duty for legal purposes, the tentacles of understanding and enquiry must be ubiquitous. Obviously, it is impossible to treat only the symptoms of a disease. Practicing as holistic doctors, we acknowledge that malocclusion is most often a symptom of something else, and our job as orthodontists is to track that problem to its source in order to accomplish effective and stable results.

This sounds almost mystical and, hopefully, exhilaratingly mystical. It makes every orthodontist a psychoanalyst, a detective, a shaman, a priest and a friend; it requires every doctor to be a whole human being, which is a highly romantic but essential calling.

Only whole human beings can treat whole human beings. Being a whole human being is not always easy to demand of anyone, but it is a particularly important demand of all clinicians whose training is so concentrated, who must be knowledgeable about so much and whose time per patient is so terribly limited — and now that is a problem. How can orthodontists be made whole? How can we be equipped to deal effectively with the complex bundles of contradictions we call our patients? That is the quintessential essence and answer of doctoring.

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