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My Education in Dentistry

Although I resemble my father both temperamentally and physically, I did not inherit his sound teeth. He had his first filling when he was in his late seventies, and he died with all of his teeth, including his wisdom teeth.

Alas, I have a long, dreary acquaintance with a variety of dentists. Family legend has it that I bit my first dentist, Dr. Crook, when he probed my teeth too forcefully for my liking. I amassed an impressive number of fillings throughout my teens and twenties, in addition to losing a molar or two along the way.

When we lived in Takoma Park, Maryland, I had a dentist who did not believe in the use of any anesthesia, either when he drilled and filled a tooth or when he extracted one. He fit the stereotype of a painful dentist; I had no cause to want to continue in his care. During our long residence in Dallas, the slow but seemingly inexorable dental erosion continued. My dentist there was a friend with whom we bowled once a week, and I felt that I was getting good care. One of the last things I did before we moved from Dallas was to visit him with a nagging suspicion of another molar going bad. He assured me that there was nothing wrong with the tooth if I would but stop chewing ice, a practice which I did not indulge in.

Within days of our arrival in Richmond, that innocent tooth spoke rather forcibly to me. I called the one neighbor whom I had met and asked for the name of a dentist - any dentist. Pam told me that next door to her lived an excellent dentist, whose receptionist gave me an immediate appointment. Dr. Wilson x-rayed the offending tooth, discovered that it was abscessed, prescribed an antibiotic, and in a few days hesitantly treated me to my first root canal, even though he feared that the tooth could not be salvaged. After some continued and difficult treatment with an oral surgeon, the tooth submitted to salvation. In the meantime, Pam invited Paul and me for dinner, where we met Dr. Wilson and his wife as neighbors rather than as a dentist. The evening proved to be the beginning of a delightful personal friendship, as well as an enduring relationship with a dentist.



When I was first in his office, Dr. Wilson had asked me how long it had been since I'd seen a dentist and told me later that he had been surprised when I said six weeks rather than six years. He suggested that I return for a consultation, bringing Paul along with me.

He carefully explained to us that my teeth were in such bad condition that he recommended a "full mouth restoration." As an adjunct professor of dentistry at the Medical College of Virginia School of Dentistry of Virginia Commonwealth University, he was conducting a program in which he closely supervised the top senior dental students in the intricate procedures of such a restoration. He explained that he didn't have the time to do the work himself in his office, but that I would get excellent care from a variety of specialists as well as from the students. He said that the cost of a privately done reconstruction would compare with the cost of a luxury automobile. (He drove a Cadillac.) The Dental School reconstruction would be less expensive and every bit as good, although it would take a considerable time.

For the next four years, I spent almost every Friday in a dental chair at the Lyons Building at M.C.V. Despite the length, complexity, and discomfort of the treatment, I became very fond of each of the four successive dental students who did the work, as well as Dr. Wilson and the members of the faculty who supervised and often actually did much of the work. All along the way the students and their superiors explained to me in detail the work they were doing. I developed great respect for all the intricate details of what was happening in my mouth. In addition to their explanations, I was allowed to watch the actual work. When I couldn't use their eyeglasses as a mirror into my mouth, they would rig up a mirror so that I could see. I began to feel that I was learning a great deal more than most dental patients ever learn about dentistry, and I enjoyed the experience.

One of my favorite specialists was the periodontist who probably inflicted the most pain as he cut away excessive tissue or grafted tissue from my palate onto missing places of gum tissue. I heard a great deal of in-house professional humor as they teased each other asking such questions as "Is this the first time you've ever done this?" or explained to me that I now knew why he was called "Shaky." I became fascinated with the process of acquiring full mouth braces in my fifties, the student doing most of the orthodontia with the kindly specialist peering over his shoulder. I did, however, find it rather difficult really to like the endodontists who seemed to delight in the necessity of inflicting pain as they did root canals. Nevertheless, I was fascinated with the tiny files with which they attacked the nerves in the teeth. Often the Dean of the Dental School, a periodontist himself, would join the group of dentists around my chair, making suggestions, bolstering my morale, and generally making himself a genial observer. At several points my faithful attendants suggested that I might be eligible for a dental degree. I couldn't agree with them, but I did learn to value and respect the disciplines of all the specialists, who were caring, compassionate professionals, as well the students who were clearly going to be credits to their profession.

As the treatment wore on, Dr. Wilson, by then "Dick" to Paul and me, agonized over the length of time my case was taking, while I took great interest in the progress we were making and observing every step of the activity going on in my mouth. Perhaps I have a weird curiosity, but I did enjoy being able to watch and generally understand the details of what they were doing in my mouth. They seemed to appreciate the fact that I was serious about their work. I became well acquainted with "my" students, agonizing when

Bill's wife tired of being a neglected student wife and left him and rejoicing when Paul and I attended Bert's wedding in Virginia Beach. Phil, the student who finished the work, was a particular favorite of mine. The last afternoon when Phil put the finishing touch on my new mouth, Dean Kennedy came to the final appointment with a bottle of champagne. State regulations forbade toasting our success there, but Paul and I invited all of them to our house the following Sunday to enjoy the champagne.



My new mouth was a just cause for celebration, all the teeth capped and straight with a bridge or two to replace the earlier losses. Unfortunately, the passage of twenty-five years has seen deterioration in that beautiful job, but I still have a lot of my teeth. More important, I have a whole different regard for dentists and their painstaking work. I still consider Dick and his wife valued friends as well as being sure that he must be the best dentist on the East coast.

Note:

benefited from his care. This past April, the VCU School of Dentistry named the Graduate Perio Clinic in honor of Dr. Wilson and his colleague, Dr. J. Gary