



The value of compassion in dentistry

Raymond Silkman

Abstract: More than knowledge or expertise in the chosen field of healthcare is necessary for proper patient care. Humans and animals with higher functioning social groups need and seek out warmth, comfort or what may be translated as caring and compassion in their relationships. In essence we want to feel that someone is involved with us with their heart, not just their mind and knowledge.

Indexing Terms: chiropractic; dentistry; compassion; patient-focussed care.

When I think about the importance of compassion in my dental practice I begin to consider my mortality and find myself wondering what is or would be thought of me when I am no longer ... when I depart and what did I really contribute or others believe that I contributed? Obviously this can play out in many arenas within the context of the life that I lead as a practitioner, father, husband, son, friend, etc.

However, there are common threads among those relationships and so not knowing what others think now or will conclude later, my wish is that they would know that I care and cared when we were involved in whatever capacity and relationship we shared.

So the issue of compassion in healthcare delivery to me is complex and I often wonder, *'would knowledge or expertise in the chosen field of healthcare be all that is necessary for proper patient care?'*

In animal studies where food and warmth/comfort were given by two different animal statues to the young offspring, although the food was taken by the offspring from one statue, they immediately chose to cling, hug or hang onto the statue providing softness, comfort and warmth regardless of whether it provided food.

It appears that humans and animals with higher functioning social groups need and seek out warmth, comfort or what may be translated as caring and compassion in their relationships. In essence we want to feel that someone is involved with us with their heart, not just their mind and knowledge.

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I believe the belief that a patient has in their healthcare practitioner as a caring, compassionate person enables and facilitates what's known as the doctor/patient trust and in a sense starts the healing process even before any treatment has begun. Yes, there may be a placebo effect in this context but we know that placebos work because there is such trust and hope involved in a process. Often a drug, healthcare practitioner, or treatment suggested by a trustworthy, compassionate and caring practitioner can help a patient start their healing journey immediately.

Ultimately this is a two way street because the practitioner will also benefit by being invested in the healing outcome of his or her patients and providing sensitive, accurate and well planned out care. The practitioner tends to provide this care in a way that touches their own essence and sense of fulfillment, which is often why they chose to be in the healthcare field.

My journey as a healthcare practitioner is probably an extension of my journey as a human being in relation to others, whether family, friends, co-worker or anyone else. As I continued and evolved from school to college and through dental school, I knew that in order to help another, genuinely caring for them had to be a part of the many facets and qualities I needed to bring to help my patients. Reflecting back on all other relationships I had been involved with prior to becoming a dentist, it was clear that respect, connection, closeness and peacefulness in any relationship required a mutual interaction between the two people involved. However, as a healthcare practitioner, there is an even higher level of understanding in that we offer-up or bring into our doctor/patient relationships a high level of respect, caring and compassion from the very start before getting to know the patient or person for whom we are caring.

I honestly don't believe this aspect of healthcare can be studied or pretended and do believe that most of us in this field have an innate sense of compassion for others and choose this field of healthcare delivery because it is one of the few professions that allows and supports such passions. I have had many personal experiences and positive comments made by patients about their appreciation for what we had done together over the years, but the following may shed light on my perspective of compassion in my dental practice.

For years I had seen some patients that were treated by a specialist (Dr. X) in my field who had treated patients, was well known, practiced in an affluent part of our city, drove expensive vehicles and seemed to have a thriving practice. This all sounds fine, as it should from the outside; however, the trouble was that nearly all of the treatments that were provided by Dr. X were very substandard! I usually had to refer most of these patients to other specialists in the same field to redo what was done to them and worse yet many patients could not have the process reversed and had to go through much more involved procedures to correct or remedy the initial treatments. Mind you, I know none of us as practitioners are perfect, therefore I am very reluctant to bring a grievance or lawsuit upon another practitioner, so these referrals were carried out carefully and without finger pointing.

All other practitioners that I spoke to shared concerns about Dr. X's reputation and they were all baffled like I was. I wondered for a long time as to why many patients continued to go there or what was it that attracted patients to that practice, until one day I asked a patient that had been treated multiple times by Dr. X about why he continued to go back to that office over the years and this is what he said: *'Doc, when I go there, I feel like family, he hugs me and tells me I am his best patient ever, sometimes he tells me that he loves me. I feel so touched and cared for ...'*

This was really eye opening for me since I assumed that Dr. X simply didn't care about his patients enough to provide them with better care. But what I didn't understand is that Dr. X probably had compassion and did care, but regrettably the treatments he provided were the best that he had to offer.

More important, his patients felt that he cared, was compassionate and that was the key to his longevity and success.

While to me this case demonstrated the benefits of compassion even in the absence of consistent clinical competence, obviously the ideal goal we all would like to see in all our healthcare providers is a healthy dose of clinical expertise with true compassion.

Raymond Silkman

DDS

Brentwood, CA

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About

Dr. Raymond Silkman has a private practice in holistic dentistry and orthodontics in West Los Angeles, California. His practice spans a wide expanse from general dentistry, temporomandibular joint disorders, airway compromise, and the various stressors that affect a patient's dental health. He functions from an interdisciplinary perspective and works with many different types of healthcare practitioners to help make sure his patients receive optimal care.

