



ESTHETIC TEAM

THE WISDOM OF SHARED KNOWLEDGE



by
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Prepare for a Fabulous Career!

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of age or career longevity, there are clear distinctions between hygienists who are empowered to do more, and those who accept limitations in their careers. Have you fallen into a career rut where every day seems to be a repeat of the previous ("Same calculus, different day")? Where patient motivation is a fraction of what it should be and you leave work each day with a sense that something is missing? You may want to move your hygiene department to the next level, yet you seem bound by the traditions of the field.

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I recently had an opportunity to talk with my friend and colleague Cris Duval, R.D.H. After 30 years she found herself in the rut of professional boredom and burnout and. Tapping into inner strength and determination, she turned her hygiene department into what you might be dreaming of; today she is among the highest-producing hygienists in the country.

Cris provides clinical care with Dr. Brian McKay in Seattle, Washington. She typically sees seven to eight patients per day, and produces \$2000–\$3000. The services she provides (Washington State has expanded functions for hygienists) include periodontal therapy integrating laser technology, whitening, NTI appliances, sealants, and preventive products. She works from one operatory, and does not have a dedicated assistant. Cris readily acknowledges the support of the practice's assistants and administrative team in making her sched-

ule work. Here, she discusses how she made dramatic changes in her dental hygiene department.

VM: Cris, we've discussed frustration and burnout among hygienists. How have you sustained an active career for 34 years?

CD: After 30 years and approximately 36,000 hygiene recare visits I felt frustrated, to say the least. Frustrated that day after day I continued to scale and polish the same tartar/calculus and stain off my patients' teeth. Frustrated that after 30 years I had become my worst fear: a "mouth maid" who provided the required dose of guilt with a package of dental floss. My clinical skills and intellect were not being used to their fullest capacity. Something had to change. That was when I met Dr. Brian McKay. I can now say that nearly 90% of our patients present for their "cleaning visit" virtually "clean"—no stains, and only trace amounts of tartar.

VM: That sounds like a dream come true. How did you create such a change?

CD: The change had to occur within me. For years I had blamed my boss for not "letting" me do more. If that didn't work then I blamed patients' low dental IQ or the restrictions placed by insurance companies. I had so many reasons for not doing more, so many external factors that were preventing me from creating the career of my dreams. In the end, it was my own attitude and core beliefs that were holding me back.

There are many articles and lectures devoted to patient compliance, oral hygiene instruction, patient motivation, and adult learning techniques. Although these have proven valuable, none of the information was creating a significant

difference in the oral condition of my patients. Knowing that more information on motivating the patient could not solve the problem, I had to start looking inward at how I could change. The breakthrough occurred when I realized not only that I needed to change, but also that I *could* change!

VM: What changed, specifically?

CD: I had to change my way of thinking, my habits, and my communication skills. When I realized that what I had been doing was not working for my patients, I went to Dr. McKay to brainstorm new solutions. He was thrilled to help. We came to the conclusion that the basic pattern of recall visits had not changed in 20 years. By not changing my approach, I was literally participating in patients' perpetual disease state. Accepting the status quo and hoping that better home care could improve the situation would no longer be a part of my world.

VM: How did you put this into action?

CD: Well, the first step was to make a clear distinction between periodontal therapy and recare therapy. This was huge for me. Like most hygienists I was guilty of providing periodontal therapy and calling it a "cleaning." Without this distinction, patients saw very little difference in value between their "regular cleaning" and "periodontal recare."

The second step was to upgrade periodontal protocols in the practice and start treating site-specific areas of disease. To do this, everyone on the team had to be clear on the definition of *disease* (our definition includes abnormal changes in the tissue, color, texture, bleeding upon provocation, bone loss, risk factors, and how the patient's immune system is interacting with the bacterial

load). Our team's new belief is that if we see periodontal disease, we treat it. No more waiting, watching, and hoping that home care alone would make an improvement.

Dr. McKay challenges the team to constantly ask two simple questions: Why am I treating my patients the way I am today? How can I treat them better? We stated our outcome for care as, "Purposeful and methodical reduction and removal of the bacterial load around every tooth." (This is accomplished by systematic use first of lasers to decontaminate, then of ultrasonics with slim-line tips to debride the biofilm matrix.) Together with the team we created the motto, "We treat happy, healthy patients who are inspired and prepared for a better tomorrow."

Now that my prophylaxis patients are healthy, I have more flexibility during appointments. Periodontal patients are well maintained and present with only trace amounts of tartar, and recare patients are taking a more active role in their care.

VM: What changed in terms of your way of thinking?

CD: In the past, treatment modalities, which focused on removal of stain and tartar alone, did very little to improve patients' resistance to bacteria or immune response to periodontal pathogens. As I reviewed the literature, I could see that a new paradigm was emerging and I wanted to be a part of that. In his book *Today Matters*, author John Maxwell states, "The only adequate preparation for tomorrow is the right use of today. Preparation for today gives confidence tomorrow. I always try to look at today as preparation for the future."¹ This gave me hope that preparing my patients for better oral health was possible. I expanded on Maxwell's concepts to

Repairing (Focus: yesterday [guilt])	Preparing (Focus: today, and impact tomorrow [hope])
consumes time	increases efficiency
fosters discouragement	increases confidence
increases cost	saves money through prevention
pays now for yesterday	pays now for tomorrow
becomes an obstacle to growth	takes you to a higher level
focuses on calculus removal	focuses on comprehensive care
takes more appointment time	opens opportunities within the appointment
decreases service mix	increases variety of services
uses hand instruments	makes use of ultra-sonic and laser technology
patient remains in "danger zone"	patient remains in "safety zone"

create new distinctions to prepare my patients for health, rather than to "repair" them.

VM: *Do you have a simple way of sharing this with patients?*

CD: I explain that when they experience bleeding, calculus build-up, and challenges in maintaining healthy tissue, they are in what I call the "danger zone." When patients present in the danger zone the clinician has to focus on repairing damage caused by chronic bacterial attacks. The goal is to find the right combination of home care and professional care to keep the patient in the "safety zone." Safety zone patients know to look for subtle signs (swelling, bleeding, bad taste and odor) that the amount of bacteria in their mouth is exceeding their body's ability to respond. Regardless of established recare intervals, our patients now know to make an appointment if these symptoms can't be controlled with home care.

VM: *I think many hygienists would love to reenergize their careers as you have. What other changes did you make?*

CD: Clearly my relationship with patients needed to change. I found myself stuck in the rut of being a "hall monitor" for patient compliance. Often the conversations were one-sided at best, and confrontational at worst. Patients weren't happy, I was exhausted, and the practice wasn't growing, because I didn't have the time or energy to focus on comprehensive care. Through continuing education and many small steps, results began to shift.

Before I implemented a new approach, I reflected on the goal of having "happy, healthy patients who are inspired and prepared for a better tomorrow." Once the outcome was clearly stated it became relatively easy to discover the strategy to develop a new approach.

Creating inspired relationships begins with the way I greet our patients. First, I take a deep breath to increase my energy level. All conversation is focused in a positive direction. In the past, I opened conversations by asking, "How are you doing today?" Cringing at the thought of where the conversation might go, I waited to see if the patient was hav-

ing a good day or a bad day for. By asking an open-ended question that could be answered in either a positive or a negative way, I was giving up a bit of control over my time. I now say, "Tell me about something wonderful in your life." This small shift has dramatically improved the flow of the visit and helps patients relax.

With patient anxiety low, I can now focus on the new message and redirect the flow of the appointment. I now explain, "The way I've been taking care of you in the past isn't good enough anymore. From now on, we'll work together based on today's information. In the past, we only had tools and technologies to take the tartar off your teeth. We focused on removing what had accumulated since you were in last. Today we have tools and technology that will take better care of you and prepare you for a better tomorrow." I clearly state three things to each patient:

- Here's how I'm going to treat you today.
- This is why I'm going to do it that way.
- This is what it will mean to you.

Expanded, these statements might sound like this:

"I'm going to use a laser as part of your treatment today; this will allow me to reduce the amount of bacteria underneath your gum line. You'll leave here today in what I call the 'safety zone,' meaning that the bacterial load is sufficiently reduced so that your immune system will be able handle the growing colonies of bacteria. Research shows that most people remain in this safety zone about 90 days.^{2,3} This may vary for you. If you have any symptoms, like redness, persistent bleeding, puffiness, foul odor or taste, it means that you may have crossed into the 'danger zone.' If that happens, please call and make an appointment."

VM: I know that your state permits hygienists to use lasers. Would your system work without the laser?

CD: I think the shift in attitude and communication skill has more of an impact than the specific tools selected. We use lasers because we believe in them. Each practitioner can develop protocols based on current standard of care. The key is to remain open to change and continue to upgrade protocols based on the most current information. A year from now, my protocol may shift slightly. What will remain is my commitment to "happy, healthy

patients who are inspired and prepared for a better tomorrow."

VM: You schedule patients for approximately one-hour appointments. If you aren't removing heavy tartar and stain, what is happening during this time?

CD: Once patients became responsible for their oral health they also became much more receptive to conversations about restorative and esthetic care. Because I no longer need to spend 20 to 30 minutes hand scaling, I have time to answer questions about comprehensive care, smile design, occlusion, and more. I have time to take impressions, deliver products, and support the doctor with same-day restorative care. I can honestly say that these last four years have been the best in my 34-year career. I'm very much looking forward to the next 10!

How will you prepare for a better tomorrow? By adopting core beliefs of peak performers, you can change the course of your career. Believing that change is not only possible, it is a must in order to remain current in the field, creates constant curiosity. Asking great questions and sharing

your passion with the team invites a cooperative spirit. You can prepare for a fabulous career at any stage of the game by shifting your focus, increasing your communication skills, and empowering yourself to take on a new standard.

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