

# What's a Dentist to Do? Fighting the Good Fight

**Jack L. Churchill, D.D.S.\***

Over these past years I have had help with these columns. A good friend and fellow dentist has been sending me articles and ideas all along, making suggestions for topics, several of which I have used. That person, Dr. Donald Benson, has been a mentor of mine for many years, one I have looked up to in many ways. He was born and raised in Rochester, Minnesota. From baptism to memorial service, he was a lifelong member of Bethel Lutheran Church. Don passed away June 11, 2011. He leaves behind his wife Pat, son Eric, daughter Kristen, four grandchildren, and many nieces and nephews.

Of course our profession loses many of its "warriors" every day, and to single out one may seem to some to be unfair. But I want to proceed not only because of who Don was, but what he represented.

During the past several decades, dentistry without question has gone through remarkable changes in every aspect. Prevention, nutrition, computerization, auxiliary use, technology, materials, techniques, the list goes on. These changes are indisputable, and have undeniably improved the care we give our patients. We should embrace these changes and use them for the benefit of our patients. Of course, they make our own lives a whole lot easier.

To embrace these changes, however, does not mean we must nor should walk away from what

dentistry should be. The old days of the dentist standing over his patient slowly drilling away with his belt-driven handpiece are gone. But in its stead, we are creating something else. We are creating a public which is sometimes suspicious of our intentions.

Case in point: A remarkable new technology which allows us to point an instrument into the grooves of a tooth to give a numerical reading diagnosing minute caries. Early

detection is, of course, the best. However, how many new patients have presented at your practice from a hi-tech dental exam elsewhere who "all of a sudden" have a dozen cavities? Now don't get me wrong: We should embrace change, but we should not walk away from reason. New technology vs. sharp explorer; clearly new school vs. old school. Yet one does not necessarily exclude the other.

We can have the wonderful high technologies and not need to discard the "old school" values.

Don was the epitome of melding the old with the new. Don was a lifetime learner, a "student" of dentistry. He taught part-time at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry and also at the Rochester Dental Hygiene School. He was a student of change and believed in it, but never at the expense of integrity, compassion, honesty, commitment, selflessness, and service.

To me and those who knew him, Don was a flag bearer for those

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Please e-mail us at [jackchurchill@msn.com](mailto:jackchurchill@msn.com) or fax us at (612) 339-3618. We look forward to hearing from you not only regarding this article, but also if you have any ethical dilemmas you would like to present to the membership. Perhaps we can help you decide what to do.

things that were honorable in our profession, those things that were tried and true, those things that have worked for dentistry in the past. Call it "old school" if you may, but if you do, please do so with respect, because those "old school" ways are the ways that have made dentistry what it is today.

Don was concerned that those ways were leaving us. He was worried that the profession of dentistry was losing ground. His response was action. He always immersed himself in his profession. He served to the end, contributing as a member of the MDA's Constitution, Bylaws and Ethics Committee, resigning only when his body told him to do so.

Don was also one who could see things as black and white, not gray. In a world of gray, Don was a crusader for what was right and good. That is no easy task. For all of us, the pull of "just this one time" or "who will ever know" or "everybody else is doing

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# Ethics Committee

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it” is strong. Don seemed to pull back harder than most. He was always the first to draw a line in the sand.

Don loved his profession and was very proud of it. He was one of its strongest advocates. Don was resolute in his campaign for what was good and decent not only for dentistry but in his private life – his family, his volunteer work with the Boy Scouts and the Salvation Army Dental Clinic in Rochester, and his serving as superintendent in his church’s Sunday School.

He was a strong voice for integrity in our profession. He rejected the “Madison Avenue” style in favor of “Main Street” dentistry, saddened by the proliferation of advertising within our ranks. If there was anyone who perennially belonged at the top of one of those “Top Dentists” lists it was Don, but Don would be the very first to reject those lists as an affront,

a cancer invading the profession, reducing it to a caravan of snake-oil vendors.

We all must bear the yoke for what is good, right, and decent in this profession of ours independent of the distractions of money, recognition, and other prideful pursuits. Don Benson bore this yoke with a mettle beyond most. I always felt as though he wanted us to live our lives as if someone was watching.

Don Benson taught me that it’s okay to embrace much of what is new in our profession but to always be a champion for much of what is old, tried, and true. Conversely, for our younger generation of dentists who champion the new and the cutting edge, remember to not only embrace the old values, but indeed recapture them.

Don’s funeral was a testament to the respect he had among his peers.

The pews were full of dentists. I know he had a huge impact on each of them as he did with me. I’m sure he served, without knowing, on the personal “Board of Directors” of many of those in attendance that day – that is, a person’s private list of people they admire and emulate. His impact was beyond what even Don could imagine. You see, Don had it right all along, and our profession is better because of Don and people like him.

So Don, thank you for all your years of standing up and holding your ground for what is right for dentistry. And thank you for all your help and ideas for my columns. I’ll miss your articles sent with your hand-scribbled notes on the side of the pages. Yes, Don, I know what you’d say: “Well, you’re on your own now, kid. Keep fighting the good fight.”

Rest well, Dr. B. ■

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