

## What's a Dentist to Do? Hi-Yo Silver...

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

The general view we dentists have of ourselves is one of being alone. We see our accomplishments in school, and afterward in our practices, as being performed without others. We all attend to our patients' needs within the four lonely walls of our offices. We fill and crown and restore and repair, and no one really knows how we're doing. We're alone except for the assistant sitting next to us, but she is often too busy handing us the correct instrument to notice.

We're Lone Rangers, aren't we? Or are we?

I submit to you that the opposite is true. Though often we do feel alone in this business of dentistry, we are all not just dentists but collaborators. We collaborate with many to get our dental products and services to our patients. We depend upon dental and biomedical researchers for the latest in dental products. They depend on us for our feedback. We generalists rely on our specialists to perform services we can't do, while they, of course, receive their cases from us. Our dental schools and the dental community enjoy a synergistic relationship. Dentists' successes depend in large part on us working together in formal organizations and informal groups of all types. We interface and collaborate in many different study clubs to share ideas and techniques. We collaborate through the Minnesota Dental

Association in many ways to further organized dentistry's agenda. Other co-collaborators include our hygienists and staff, our lab technicians, our consultants, and our patients' physicians.

Dentists do not practice within a bubble. We practice within a dynamic, ever-changing landscape of co-professionals, all attempting to achieve the same thing, all wanting to make a difference. That landscape, that framework, is larger than you think. It is quite an impressive support group.

However, these facts dim under the lights of modern society, and it is the picture of the dentist as the Lone Ranger which dominates our imaginations.

Collaboration is especially important when one of us is in trouble. Few of us would view the plight of, let us say, an addicted colleague with indifference. If it is dentistry's obligation to protect the public from harmful dentistry

and we are all collaborators, then "every dentist's patient is, in some sense, every other dentist's patient."\*\* If a dentist is addicted, no matter how far away he or she is, it is my collaborator who is addicted and my patients, in a sense, who are at risk. The addicted colleague is not a Lone Ranger in trouble but someone to whom I am bound to help, for his or her sake, and for the sake of our common patients. A "dentist cannot

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Please e-mail us at 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.

view an addicted collaborator as someone with a problem which is only his or her own."\*\* Relationships between dentists cannot be ones of indifference. We are obliged to practice collaboratively.

We all must practice collaboratively in another way — to improve the stead of those less fortunate, specifically to provide dentistry to those in need.

I recently had lunch with Dr. Adele Della Torre. She is a practicing dentist in Minneapolis who has a deep-seated commitment to helping the disenfranchised. Through her church, she became involved with Families Moving Forward, a faith-

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*\*\*Quoted from Dental Ethics at Chairside: Professional Principles and Practical Applications by David T. Ozar, Ph.D. and David J. Sokol, D.D.S., J.D., F.A.G.D., Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C.*

# Ethics Committee

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based organization of volunteers in Minneapolis that provides temporary emergency shelter, permanent affordable housing, and supportive services to low income families with children. Her church, along with a cooperative of other churches, provides breakfast, dinner, and a place to sleep for homeless families with children one week per quarter. For more information, their website is <http://www.familiesmovingforward.org/>.

With the increasing income gap and increased cost of housing, the homelessness problem is becoming worse. In the 2006-2007 school year, there were 4,441 "homeless and highly mobile" children in the Minneapolis Public School system; that is, those without a permanent home living here and there with others. Every single school within the system had at least one homeless child.

Adele works on policy for affordable housing, specifically with Heading Home Hennepin. This joint initiative between Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis aims to end homelessness in Minneapolis within 10 years. A noble endeavor indeed.

Overseen by Heading Home Hennepin is Project Homeless Connect. This project provides services to the needy such as housing counseling, podiatry, haircuts, eye glasses, physicals, vaccinations, psychiatry, and, yes, dentistry.

Adele was asked to do dentistry for Project Homeless Connect, and with the help of Apple Tree Dental, provided dental services for 45 needy individuals one day last year. She is now on Apple Tree's Board of Directors, attempting to find solutions

to Minnesota's dental access problems.

She and her business partner are attempting to turn part of their practice into a non-profit, thereby helping the needy one day per month.

Charity work, Adele says, is well and good. She participates and applauds those who participate in Give Kids a Smile Day. However, she feels we need to work on moving toward a more permanent fix, a more comprehensive rehabilitation, so to speak.

She tells the story of a young girl who had a fixed space maintainer still in place which began impeding the eruption of her permanent teeth. She simply needed it removed, but her mother couldn't afford to drive her to the dentist. A boy, while she was voluntarily babysitting through Families Moving Forward, was playing telephone. He playfully spoke into the telephone, "I don't have the money."

Adele possesses a faith-based need to give back. It is a calling she has felt since childhood. It's easy, she says, to give freely to family and friends. However, to give yourself away to strangers is a spiritual experience. She felt unfulfilled until she was able to do this. To be truly happy, one must find a way to "live your life outside of yourself".

No matter what your religious affiliation, the message is clear. Practice humility. Practice hospitality. When you invite guests to your table, invite and include the lowly, the needy, those less fortunate.

Adele's efforts symbolize what we all need to do. Reject today's greed and indifference. Challenge yourself. Go outside "the box". Help others. Seek solutions. And remember, unlike

the Lone Ranger, you are not alone. ■

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