

What's a Dentist to Do?

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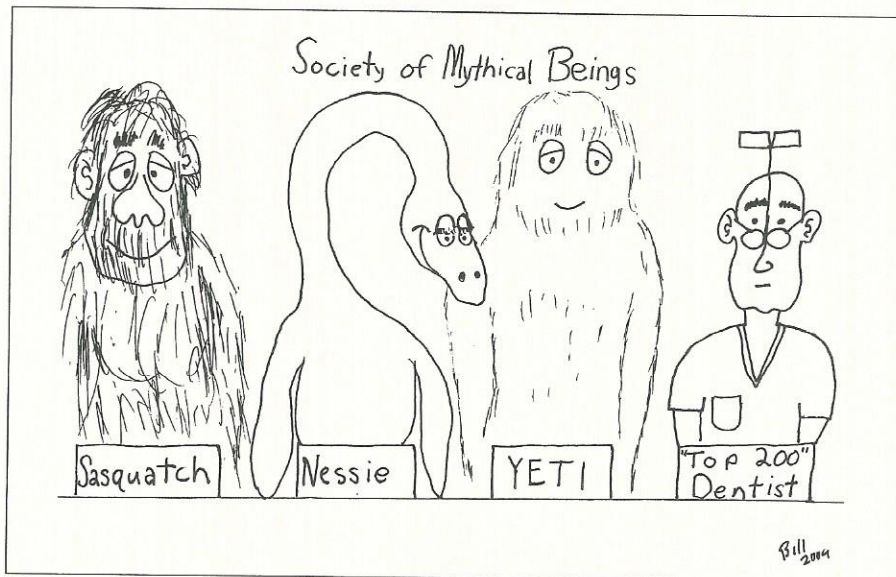
The Competitive Spirit and Professional Integrity

Competition — a striving for the same object, position, market, prize etc. usually in accordance with a set of rules — drives the American way. It is the gas that runs our cars. Without it, the car stops. It is responsible for most of society's innovations. It is what gets us up in the morning. One theory holds that the Communist world fell because it tried to survive without it. We have thrived because we not only live with it but we embrace it. Competition is a good thing.

Likewise, competition in dentistry makes us all better dentists. It spurs us all to offer our patients the best service, the best dental materials, the best techniques, the best practice management ideas, the best of everything in order to have a successful practice — in order that patients choose us over our peers.

However, the practice of advertising, often a necessary attendant to competition, may send a damaging message to the public, and that is that "there is something more important to the dentist than the well-being of his or her patients." Advertising "shenanigans" suggest that a "sale" is more important than the patient's needs. It suggests that treatment decisions would be directed by the effectiveness of the advertising rather than the patient's condition.

Secondly, such advertising suggests a different measure of success for a dental practice — that is, beating other dentists in the marketplace — when the true measure should be the ability



Cartoon by Bill Stein

to provide for our patients. Such activity communicates to the public that our objective is to sell and to "win", and that serving our patients is not the end, but only the means to achieve a greater market share.

Advertising in dentistry is here to stay. When engaging in it, be careful to do so in support of dentistry's central values and norms of professional conduct, thereby enhancing our community's view of what dentistry is all about. Use advertising to educate rather than simply to "out-compete" others.

This potential to misrepresent dentistry through questionable advertising practices exists in other ways also. It exists every day in our practices — for instance, at chairside, in how we portray our values to our patients. Consider a dentist whose manner conveys salesmanship rather than an interactive caring for his or

her patient's needs. Our words, our actions, our attitude chairside can misrepresent just as readily as overly aggressive advertising. Consequently, each of us must regularly examine our practices to make sure they reflect our profession's central values. These values will be addressed in the next column.

Please e-mail us at kdegrote@mndental.org or fax us at (651) 646-8246. We look forward to hearing from you not only regarding this issue, 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. ■

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