

## What's a Dentist to Do? The Power of Presence

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

I believe in the power of presence. Presence is a noun, a state of being. It is static. It is not an action verb. Our society today places high value on doing, and devalues something as lackluster as that which simply exists or just "sits there". Yet the true presence of being with someone can be a very powerful healer. "In it, there is an intimate connection with another that is perhaps too seldom felt in a society that..."\*\* is always on the move, doing, doing, doing.

Several years ago my neighbor's mother died. Our neighbor had been raised in a small town in southwestern Minnesota, which was where her mother's funeral was held. My wife and I drove out to the town from our home in Plymouth to be with her and her husband during this difficult time. I still remember the look on her face when she saw us walk into the church. I believe, to this day, she has never forgotten this simple act of presence. We often can "do" nothing for someone when they lose a loved one, but simply being there for them has great healing power.

I have three or four *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books tucked in the shelves of my library at home. They are precious to me because each short story within has the initials of my dad, one of my sisters, or my aunt in the upper righthand corner. When my mother was in a nursing home before she died 11 years ago, we would sit with her and read from these books. When a story had been read, we'd

initial it, and the next visitor would be able to take over where we left off. It was our way of being connected, being fully there with my mom. Though my mother could not speak and never did heal, our presence improved her final days.

When my wife was a child, she used to see a pediatrician by the name of Dr. Heilig. When she was sick she would always feel better as soon as she saw him. His reassuring presence was very real. How many times have you held a crying baby and the baby stops crying? The healing power of presence – it changes others and changes us for the better.

This brings me to an issue of dental ethics. Recently the MDA received an email from an insurance company inquiring about the recommended policy regarding 24-hour

coverage for our patients. Apparently a number of practices are not providing adequate coverage in case of dental emergencies. In these cases, the patient seeking after-hours emergency care receives voicemail instructions to either call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. Section 4.B. of the ADA's *Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct* states that "dentists shall be obliged to make reasonable arrangements for the emergency care of their patients of record." For those patients not of record, they need also "to make reasonable arrangements" or if they treat them, they need to get them back to their regular dentists unless the patients prefer otherwise. Consciously sending one of your

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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.

patients to an emergency room is generally not considered reasonable.

As the dental community, we need to demonstrate a presence to our patients. We need to make it clear that we are here for them 24/7 and not when it's convenient or profitable. For heaven's sake, the emergency rooms are packed! They certainly don't need our emergencies.

We are in the relationship business. We build relationships. That is what we do. Of course, the doctor-patient relationship is important and should be respected: confidentiality, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, veracity, all those virtuous things in our Code.

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\*\* From *The Power of Presence, by Debbie Hall. In This I Believe, The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women. New York, New York: Holt Paperbacks, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2006, page 100.*

† From *The Shack, by William P. Young. Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007.*

# Ethics Committee

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This doctor-patient relationship is what we base our careers upon. But it, of course, involves an overlay of power. The doctor possesses an expertise that the patient needs, and therefore the doctor possesses the power of that knowledge and particular skill. However, true spiritual relationships between people do not involve a chain of command, a hierarchy, a power of one over another, where rules and enforcement of those rules exist. True relationships are a circle, not a chain where people are totally dependent upon one another – a circle of love, respect, and serving.†

I was driving home from work the other day and approached the stoplight at a busy intersection. There were two left turn lanes — the far left one had no cars at all, and the other one was bumper-to-bumper with probably a dozen cars. I found that odd. And then it became obvious to me why. There stood a homeless person in ragged clothes at the corner with a cardboard sign, and no one wanted to pull alongside her.

Yes, relationships of power of one person over another abound in our society. It is the matrix in which we live. However, to experience a true relationship, step out of the money

mill and experience one in which there is complete inter-dependence.

Put yourself in the presence of someone who needs you, put your home phone number on your office phone message, and maybe pull into that far left lane. ■

“Sometimes it takes  
more than one person  
to heal.”

– Dr. Lee Jess