

What's a Dentist to Do? The Two-Headed Dragon

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

I love sports, sports of all kinds. I played sports as a kid — football, basketball, baseball, track and field, all at a small high school in a small town in southeastern Minnesota. I continued playing intramurals at the University of Minnesota, and to this day I remain a “sports nut”.

I now have two sons who are into sports at Wayzata High School. I believe team sports are invaluable to kids. They teach commitment to a common goal. They teach cooperation in working toward that goal. They teach work ethics; that is, the realization that hard work pays dividends. Sports teach our kids how to humbly handle success and how to graciously accept defeat.

Sports teach how to adjust when the losses outnumber the wins. They teach what competition is all about; that is, more than one team is interested in that championship trophy. One team will get it, and many others will not. I try to impart to my sons that winning is not the ultimate goal, but the learning and appreciation of these lessons is most important.

I know what you're asking. So how is

that going for you? Well, they are teenagers, after all!

My 17-year-old son is vying for the quarterback position on the Wayzata football team. He has great skills. He's tall, has a rocket arm, is fast, is smart, makes good decisions, and has great leadership abilities. However, Wayzata is a big high school and a

few other kids have a similar resumé. So football is

teaching him the things it should, one of which is nothing is guaranteed. You can't rely on others to do the work for you. Things

happen that are beyond your control.

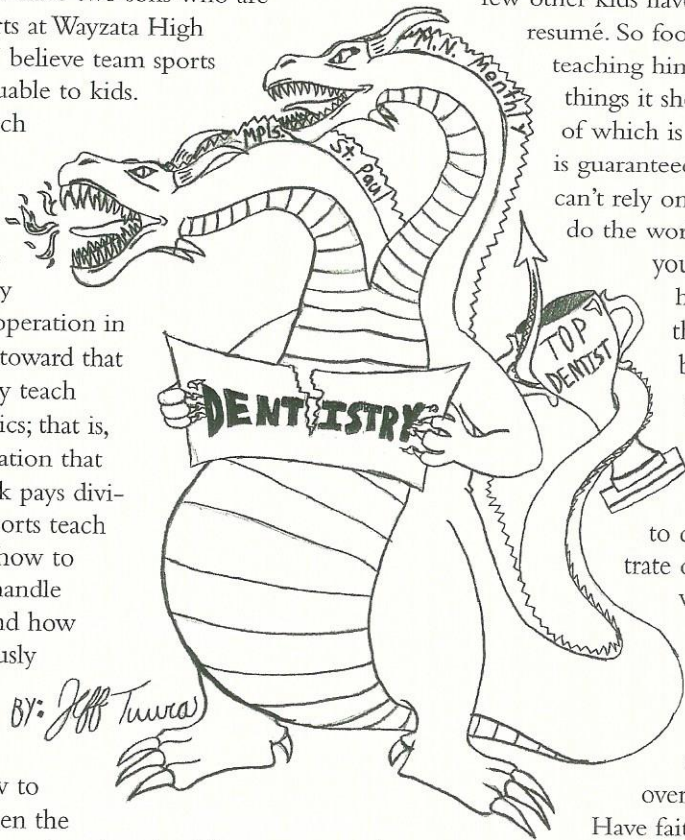
You have to concentrate only on what you can do.

You have no control over others.

Have faith, faith

that things happen for a reason because there is a master plan. The main thing is that you do your best, giving it your all.

I tell my son these lessons are ones he will apply in the real world later in life. Well, doctors, none of us is a teenager anymore, and we are in the real world of dentistry. Now is the time to apply what we've learned.



Please e-mail us at pglasrud@mndental.org or fax us at (612)767-8500. 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.

Both *Mpls St. Paul* magazine AND *Minnesota Monthly* are coming out with their “Top Dentist” lists in July of 2007. Again we are all faced with the decision of whether or not to participate.

Such a flagrant example of commercialism in dentistry hurts us all. We are the victims. I won't repeat the ADA's *Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct* and its “claim of superiority without substantiation” and “false and misleading” clauses (see *Northwest Dentistry* Sept/Oct 2002). What I will say is that these lists

Continued on next page

***Dr. Churchill** is Chair of the Minnesota Dental Association's Committee on Ethics, Bylaws, and Constitution. He is a general dentist in private practice in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**Chambers DW. Commercialism in Dentistry and Its Victims. (editorial) *Issues in Dental Ethics*.

†Quoted from Dr. Gordon Christenson at the 2004 Academy of General Dentistry Annual Meeting.

‡Fuchs DJ. *ADA News*, September 4, 2006.

Ethics Committee

Continued from previous page

subordinate what is important to us as dentists — relationships we have with our patients, good will and commonality with our peers, and doing what is right — “to negotiated, competitive self-interest.”**

Why do some of us subscribe to these lists? New graduates are leaving dental school when they’re “just barely not dangerous”† with debt and may succumb to slick advertising schemes. “High tech” dentists with the high costs of their cutting-edge dentistry need high-end patients. They become focused on the “commercial cherry-picking of patients, emphasizing high-profit services.”** The slower, more calculated process of gaining skills, then success, then high technology has been often replaced with the rapid investment in high technology first, forcing us into hucksterism and market positioning to pay for it. Of course, some who are participants in these exclusive lists are either unaware of the issues involved or are indifferent to them. It is the MDA’s wish to enlighten them as we have attempted to do the last couple of times these lists have come out. And finally and of course, there are those who simply love the recognition in print: ADHD — Advanced Dentist Hallucinatory Disorder.

We used to do all our dentistry, let us say, within a circle, which included dentistry done to eliminate disease and to gain oral health, i.e., fillings to eliminate decay, crowns to bring teeth back to proper function, bridges to replace missing teeth (now implants), root planing to restore tissue health. Now we do more dentistry outside the circle, i.e., tooth whitening, veneers, “faster” dentistry, crowns to improve esthetics, “Botox-type” dentistry. These “outside-the-circle” services are money makers, and are often marquees with which we advertise our practices.

Additionally, we are direct victims of dental commercialism. Many of our dental journals, our consultants, and our continuing education providers talk the same talk: “Doctor, you can be a success if you just give your patients what they want.” Then we proceed to advertise this to the general public, saying, “We can give you more of what you want than the other guy.”

Dentists used to be number one on the list of most respected professions. We are now number five, behind pharmacists, clergy, physicians, and college teachers. I believe the reason for this slump is because we have moved from being

“patient advocates” to being “practice advocates”.‡

We need to revisit what sports taught us years ago and what my son is now learning, keeping in mind one thing: This is not a game. Those lessons include:

1. Hard work bears fruit, but it does not come easily or quickly.
2. Concentrate on what you can do. Don’t worry about the other guy.
3. Develop a team for a common goal.
4. Be a leader.
5. Don’t be a trash talker. Just do it, and they will come.
6. Change course if needed.
7. Always play fair.
8. Compliment your teammates.
9. Do what is right and good.
10. Have faith in the outcome.

Maybe I’m naive, but I believe in our profession. It’s full of good people — people who care about one another. Dentistry is a team of professionals, a team which can regain people’s trust and respect, but only by doing it together. We can get back to number one in part by saying NO to *Mpls. St. Paul* and *Minnesota Monthly*. To me, the Top Dentists list is the Poster Child for what is wrong with commercialism in dentistry. It is the two-headed dragon. ■