

# What's a Dentist to Do? Thinking Without Thinking

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

You are in your consultation room. You've done your homework. You've gathered your radiographs, exam notes, your study models, your photos. Now you're waiting for Mrs. Peterson to arrive so you may present her treatment plan. Mrs. Peterson walks in, sits down, and smiles. You make pleasant conversation, and you begin. You make a clean, thorough presentation. She smiles, crosses her legs, nods, and asks relevant questions. You answer them professionally. Details are discussed – time and appointments needed, informed consent, alternatives, and financing.

"Well, Mrs. Peterson? When would you like to proceed? Are mornings or afternoons better for you?"

We and our patients make hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions each day – many insignificant, many consequential. How do we make those decisions? Many are made consciously after much deliberation. In our offices, we gather what we've learned from academia and past experiences, process that information, and make a logical decision. Our patients do the same through what they have learned and experienced – making their own thoughtful, deliberate, conscious decisions.

There is a second decision making strategy, however. It operates much more quickly below the level of consciousness. Malcolm Gladwell,

in his book *blink*,\* calls it "fast and frugal". The part of our brain called the adaptive unconscious acts as a giant computer, quickly and quietly processing large quantities of information and making instant calculations before our conscious brain goes to work. We are thereby capable of making very quick judgments on very little information. We do this unconsciously when we meet someone for the first time, when we interview someone for a job, or react to a new idea. Our patients may similarly react to our treatment plans.

Society is generally skeptical of this kind of seemingly flighty cognition.

We assume the more time and effort taken in making the decision, the better the decision.

We and our patients make hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions each day.

Doctors order more tests in offering a diagnosis. Patients seek second opinions. We teach our children – haste makes waste, look before you leap, stop and think, don't judge a book by its cover. We trust only exhaustive, meticulous decision making. However, snap decisions and first impressions, studies demonstrate, are often

every bit as accurate as decisions made more cautiously.

This rapid cognition Gladwell calls "thin-slicing". It is our brain's ability to quickly "find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience."\* At Mrs. Peterson's consultation visit, for example, let's say you do not listen

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to her concerns. Perhaps you talk down to her and do not treat her respectfully. Mrs. Peterson will listen to her gut feeling and not accept treatment. That is thin-slicing. She is unconsciously drawing on her previous experience of others treating her similarly and how she felt then and rapidly making her decision from that.

Thin-slicing is a central part of being human. We thin-slice because we have to, particularly during times when it's crunch time – when we don't have time to deliberate. Basketball players call it "court sense". We may call it "street smarts". It is a mysterious phenomenon. We need to accept the fact that it is possible to know something without knowing

*Continued on next page*

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\*\* From *blink, The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, by Malcolm Gladwell. New York, NY: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2005.

# Ethics Committee

*Continued from previous page*

why we know it, and that there are times when we may be better off operating that way.

There is a dark side to thin-slicing. It is at the root of much prejudice and discrimination. These instincts of rapid cognition can betray us or lead us astray.

For instance, say Mrs. Peterson arrives at her consultation visit in haggard clothing and is somewhat disheveled. You may thin-slice that she

will never accept treatment, and if so, would not have the money to pay for it.

The most important form of thin-slicing is the rapid judgment of other people. We are constantly trying to predict what others are thinking or feeling. Body language is one way to predict – why does Mrs. Peterson cross her legs? The face also is a rich source of information. It is a reflection of what is happening in our heads. Mrs. Peterson smiles. What does that mean? But mind-reading is dangerous.

Some patients are nervous. Some are insecure. Some know what they want. Others have no idea. Some have high dental IQ's. Some do not. Some want to be led by the hand. Others don't want to be pushed in the least. Every patient is different. Each one of them looks and acts differently,

but all need your dentistry. In your flurry to thin-slice, edit out those slices based on appearance.

Similar arguments can be made regarding people of another color, race, gender, age group, or belief. Outward prejudices are easy to identify and amend. Hidden prejudices, those outside of our awareness, within our subconscious – that's another story. We can, however, alter our first impressions by changing the experiences that

those impressions are based upon. Recognizing the power, for good and ill, that first impressions have in our lives requires us to manage and control those impressions.

We make decisions under pressure every working day. We often don't have the time or luxury of comparing all the options. We need to size up the situation quickly and act, drawing on our experience and intuition. That can be exhilarating and terrifying at the same time, even risky.

Sometimes we get weighted down with too much information – call it paralysis through over-analysis. We have to edit out a lot of it and rely on instincts. For example, when presenting treatment options, two to three are probably enough. Beyond that is overload.

Our training has provided us

the gift of expertise. This expertise changes many of our first impressions. They become better grounded in true understanding. Our instincts become deeper, tempered with the richness of knowledge. Training and experience help develop our rapid decision making. Even so-called "mind-reading" is improved upon with practice. This apparently "magical" decision making ability is actually the wisdom acquired after a lifetime of learning, watching, and doing. It is judgment. It separates winners from losers. It is a wonderful gift, but it is one that can be misused.

Malcolm Gladwell says, "We live in a world saturated with information. We have virtually unlimited amounts of data at our fingertips at all times, and we're well versed in the arguments about the dangers of not knowing enough and not doing our homework. But what I have sensed is an enormous frustration with the unexpected costs of knowing too much, of being inundated with information. We have come to confuse information with understanding."\*

"The key to good decision making is not knowledge. It is understanding. We are swimming in the former. We are desperately lacking in the latter."\*

It is our challenge to combine our best of both conscious deliberation and instinctive judgment. Learn every day, but listen to your gut. ■

*These instincts of rapid cognition can betray us or lead us astray.*