



Informed Decisions

by Howard Farran, DDS, MBA, Publisher, *Dentaltown Magazine*

We are very pleased to present you with the third annual New Grad Edition of *Dentaltown Magazine*, created especially for dental students and recent graduates. I sincerely congratulate you on entering the sacred and sovereign profession of dentistry – one of the most challenging yet highly rewarding careers on the planet! You have chosen to work in the best profession in the world, but as you might be aware, it is not going to be easy. You will experience some exhilarating highs in your dental career, but you will also endure some difficult times as well. Fortunately you don't have to go it alone. I started Dentaltown.com in 1999 as a way to connect the dental profession in ways my generation only dreamed of. I implore you to register on Dentaltown.com to join the thousands of dentists and dental professionals who go online every day to discuss their challenges, tips, questions and successes. If there is only one thing I could recommend to you as you start out, it would be to join our thriving community on Dentaltown.com. However, in my 25 years as a practicing dentist, here are a couple more things I wish to impart to you – the future of dentistry – to help make your road a little less bumpy.

Finding a Mentor

I'm often contacted by dental school students and recent graduates looking for guidance as to what they ought to do with their career starting out. You're faced with many different choices at this time in your life – but the question I hear the most is, "Where should I work?" I get the same e-mail every time around graduation: "Hi Dr. Farran, I have a dilemma and I'm wondering if you could help me. I'm going back to my hometown to practice dentistry and there are two dentists offer-

ing me a job, and I'm not sure which one I should take. One would pay me 25 percent of production including the lab bill, and the other one would pay me 35 percent of production but I would have to pay my lab bill. Which one should I take?"

The answer is obvious, right? Wrong.

I don't care about the income you make in your first year. I really don't care how you're going to get paid. What I *do* care about is your 40-to-50-year career in dentistry. You need to stop thinking about what you're going to get paid right out of the gate and worry more about things like what you're going to learn from the hiring dentist, how the hiring dentist will make you feel and whether or not he or she will be a quality mentor.

Don't look at how much in production you're going to make or what portion of the lab bill you're going to be responsible for. Find out how many times the dentist has been married. Find out what staff turnover is; do staff members leave after two years or does the dentist have a staff of long-timers? What percentage of the dentist's patients are not scheduling recalls? How many new patients are coming through the door? How many new patients does the practice need each month to keep its doors open? What's the dentist's reputation around town? How stable is this place?

It is important that you connect yourself to the dentist who is going to be the better mentor. You're worried about what you're getting paid in the immediacy when you really need to look at the big picture and figure out which dentist is going to boost your career into the stratosphere.

Student Loan Debt

Earlier this year, a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York indicated the United States currently faces more debt in student loans than in credit card and auto loan debt, and is only second to mortgage loan debt. Many den-



tal students today are graduating with a frightening \$300,000 or more in student loan debt. That's a huge dollar amount to bite off in order to start working in dentistry! It is daunting, yes, but not insurmountable.

I've been practicing dentistry longer than many of the readers of this special New Grad Edition have been alive. Because I've been around the block a few times, I've noticed a few things that might help you get a leg up on tackling your student debt. For years I've seen dentists graduate from dental school with massive debt, but they go out and buy a nice condo, a gorgeous car and they go out to eat five nights a week. They take up this gargantuan personal debt on top of their student debt because they think this is the way dentists are supposed to live. They think they've earned it. They complain all the time about their \$300,000 in student loans, but when you look at their monthly statements of cash flow, the monthly personal debt payments they've now racked up is easily two to five times their monthly student loan payment. Keeping up with the Joneses digs a much deeper hole, which is so much harder to get out of.

On the flipside, I've noticed the other extreme: Some dentists will graduate from dental school, rent 1,000 square feet in a city in which they practice dentistry...and *live there!* I'm serious – they actually live at their dental practice. They have a much different work ethic. They don't throw money at a mortgage because they live at their practice. They don't need a car because they work so hard, they don't need to go anywhere. They don't even post hours of operation on their door because they're at the practice all the time! It might be a little slow at their practice from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Thursday, but people will call them and come in late at night with a major emergency. Compare that to the dentists who say they're "patient centered," who are only open during banker's hours four days a week, and then take lunch at the same time all their patients take lunch. These dentists who have a strong work ethic, who feel no sense of entitlement whatsoever not only

have their student loan debts paid off in five years, but they've purchased a dental practice with new build outs. Everything in the practice is paid off, too! It's only when they have \$300,000 in cash do they even consider going out and purchasing a house for their new family.

Now, I'm not saying in order to pay off your student loans you must buy a practice and live in it – this is just one solution some people are

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comfortable with. The best way to pay off your debt is work like no dentist has ever worked before. You can find a happy medium. Maybe you keep your practice open during hours when your patients aren't working. Maybe you stay open on Saturdays. Maybe you simply take your lunch an hour later than your patients do. The bottom line is if you find yourself drowning in student debt, you need to make sure you're curbing your personal spending and working hard (and smart) to chip away at it. If you work at it hard enough, you will tackle that student debt quicker and be better off in the long run.

You are going to encounter a multitude of difficult situations in which you will have to make tough decisions throughout your dental career. You're going to make mistakes as well. Learning by making your own mistakes can take its toll; a much safer way is to learn from other practitioners' mistakes that you read about online and in our magazine. Dentaltown.com and *Dentaltown Magazine* exist to help you through your dental career by arming you with the best advice and information so you can make the best, informed decisions for your career, your practice and your patients. I wish you nothing but the best of luck in your career and I can't wait to see you on Dentaltown.com. ■



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