

Patient Directed Care through a Holistic, Wellness Oriented Approach to Dentistry

Within the last 20 years, dentistry has seen a tremendous improvement in esthetic tooth repair and replacement technologies and this has been widely heralded in the media via overnight cosmetic “makeovers,” etc. It is similar in medicine, with titanium hip and knee replacement and highly advertised cosmetic procedures. As wonderful as this all is, none of these technologies deal with the cause for their need. For instance, might some hip or knee replacements have been avoided through an earlier assessment of bone density and regimens employed to increase it through nutrition, appropriate supplements and exercise?

In the U.S., most all health provider-patient relationships are based on alleviating symptoms, not on assessing their core cause. This is why the pharmacological industry is the most profitable of all businesses in the U.S. Perhaps it also has to do with the U.S. being ranked 37th in the World Health Organization’s assessment of healthcare systems out of 191 countries. This translates as well to dentistry which is an offshoot of the medical model of symptom focused remedies. If a tooth aches, fix it, pull it or root canal it. If your gums bleed, clean the teeth. Nothing wrong with the above, excepting that the procedures don’t address causes, only the results - or symptoms - of a disease. This mode fosters a dependency mode between the provider and patient.

Fundamental to a more holistic, or wellness mode is a recognition that symptoms have causes, therefore therapy is based upon meticulous assessment that identifies the cause(s) from which preventive and treatment regimens are developed. It also requires a patient with a high interest in optimizing their health through a desire to understand and deal with anything that may be impeding it. This fosters a teacher-learner, interdependency role between provider and patient.

A wellness or holistic health model is defined by this basic role change between provider and patient that begins with a mutual discovery and learning process. This model is holistic in that it recognizes that the teeth and gums are only two of many elements comprising the oral system, therefore all aspects of the system need to be considered. During this discovery process wherein data is collected from the patient (such as a thorough clinical examination, x-rays, photographs, oral bacterial and saliva assessments and, as needed: CT scan, MRI, functionally related mouth models), both doctor and patient co-learn the nature of the patient’s oral system health. The doctor assumes the role of a teacher along the way, and in relating the results of the examination and assessment procedures. Preventive and treatment protocols are developed from these assessments wherein mutual responsibilities are defined. The patient then directs their care based upon their having learned the true nature of their oral status. The entire learning process facilitates a healthy developing relationship bounded by mutual respect and a desire to implement co-developed goals.