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Don't ever change!

By Jeffrey C. Hoos, DMD

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"Don't ever change!" Those were the parting words for a very young dentist from a guy about 5' 4" tall who gives great hugs and has been my patient for 30 years. Larry Maher was my first patient in dental school. He received the first injection I ever gave, the first filling, the first root canal, the first impression, and the first everything. The odd thing is that he knew he was the first to experience my inexperience!

The night of our first invasive procedure together a mandibular block and an MOD amalgam that took three hours and had to be done twice I called him to see how he was feeling. He said he was fine and looked forward to seeing me the following Friday. The first thing he said when he arrived was, "Thank you for calling the other night. It meant a lot to me."

I had some wonderful patients during my dental school years, but none compared to Mr. Maher. He really cared about me! As a result, my experience was very different from many of my classmates. They constantly complained about their patients, who didn't show up for appointments and didn't care about brushing their teeth. While I had a few of those, I always had Mr. Maher to bring me back to the world of the great patient.

A year after dental school, I was in my little one-chair office, and my receptionist said there was a friend at the front desk to see me. It was Mr. Maher, on the road through Connecticut. He had made a point of stopping to see me! I soon had him in my chair to look at my first crowns and composites. I decided to clean his teeth, and, when I finished, he asked what he owed me. There was no way I was going to charge him, so I asked for a big hug, which he readily provided.

Over the years, I gladly saw him as a patient. My ever-expanding staff, partners, and other patients were introduced to my first dental patient. Mr. Maher always gave me the same words of advice: "Don't ever change." As time went on, he was driven to the office by his daughter, and when we suggested that he might want to go to a dentist closer to home, he exclaimed, "What? Are you kidding? As long as I can make it, I'm coming to Jeffrey. I just drive to West Hartford, and my daughter drives me the rest of the way."

Eventually, he needed a very large bridge due to a fractured tooth, and we got it done. When he asked about the fee, I finally realized I needed to say some-thing that I had not verbalized before. "Mr. Maher, look around at your legacy of 30 years. What I have is a 10-operator dental office with four doctors and a staff of 30. It's because of you and the foundation you gave me that I was able to proceed with my career and the excitement and love of a great profession. You have given me the best payment of all - being a wonderful patient from the very beginning! Our friendship means so much to me. When you thanked me for calling you that first night, I knew that simple gesture would help lay the foundation for my dental philosophy - patient-centered care that is as comfortable as possible. I made that call for me because you helped me realize that I was treating a whole person, and not merely fixing teeth. Thank you for everything you have given me."



Thanks, Mr. Maher, for a great beginning. It was those early experiences that really counted and had a positive impact throughout my career.

He looked sort of stunned, surprised, and touched. Then he said, "I told you, do not ever change, and you have not. Look at what you have accomplished. All of your patients love you. I cannot thank you

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enough for everything you have done for me, and I can never repay you." We hugged and kissed goodbye like a father and son and told each other, "I love you."

I realize that Mr. Maher looks at me through rose-colored glasses, and I certainly realize that every patient doesn't love me, nor have they all been satisfied with the care they have received. What I do know is that the experiences I had early in my training influenced my attitudes about my patients through the years. Thanks, Mr. Maher, for a great beginning. It was those early experiences that really counted and had a positive impact throughout my career.

Think back about your positive patient dental experiences, and build on those. Have a productive month, a positive attitude, and keep looking for that balance.

Jeffrey C. Hoos, DMD, FAGD, is president of the Giraffe Society: "Professionals willing to stick their necks out." His seminars focus on "Balancing: The Art, Science, & Business of Dentistry." Contact him by email at jchdmd@msn.com or visit his Web site at www.dentalexplorations.com or www.bettersmile.com.

Dear Dr. Hoos,

I read your article titled "Don't ever change" this morning and wanted to tell you how wonderful it was. How refreshing to find someone who has been impacted by a dental school experience and a patient that helped to create your destiny. I'm a recent graduate from a residency at Nova Southeastern and I had a patient like your who was a first for everything. I helped rebuild this patient's mouth and with special help from a group leader I completed my first anterior bridge. This spring, the teacher that taught me how to treat my patient passed away. It was devastating for me, but I knew that my special patient Thom would be hurt too. Soon after, the patient himself was diagnosed with cancer. But, I still talk to Thom now that I am practicing so many states away.

I was touched by your article. I was inspired by your article. Thank you for sharing it with the world!

Yours Truly,

**[Name Withheld]
-A dentist in Cleveland, Ohio**

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