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Dental Care As a Commodity

Like many dentists, I am usually obliged to be available 24/7 for my patients. I have limited flexibility in changing my schedule on short notice, I have to fund my own retirement and health care, and I function as the primary worker and manager of my practice. In light of all this, the corporate model for dentistry might seem to be worth a look.

The corporate model for dentistry refers not to the traditional dental practice, which also may be a corporation, but to a model of practice whereby a corporate entity that is not controlled by the practicing dentist is responsible for many, if not all, of the nonclinical aspects of practice. Traditional dental practices build the patient-doctor relationship for a lifetime, often with regular checkup schedules. This is a key element in dental care. The patient develops a relationship of trust in the doctor and the doctor gets to know the unique issues and needs of each patient. They work together to determine treatment and to maintain health in between visits.

The corporate dental model focuses on concepts such as efficiency, shared costs, and shared facilities. In contrast to the considerations of a traditional dental practice, the corporate model must account for a layer of management costs, and the additional revenue necessary to pay those costs. Sharing expenses and the cost of equipment can be a plus, but any model that breaks the patient-doctor relationship transforms dental care into a commodity.

In addition, if there is an expected production goal, whether implicit or explicit, one has to wonder if there are decisions being made that are outside the patient-doctor continuum of care. Some corporate models offer bonuses and incentive pay based on production. On the other hand, in the traditional practice, success often is measured by patient satisfaction and by patient referrals—measures that indicate that patients felt cared for and not just treated.

When dentistry is treated as a commodity, the patient ceases to understand that oral care is about health and not just about treatment services. If we do not rise above the treatment mentality, we can never advance the oral and systemic health of Americans.

The corporation model by its very nature is focused on treatment.

However, some corporations present themselves as advocates. In a recent legislative battle, corporations argued that they improved access. Yet, one would think that the overhead costs of a corporate model would render it less able to provide free or low-cost care.

Some corporate models have proposed the use of nondentists to help access. Will the patients be told that a nondentist is performing the irreversible treatments on them? Will the patients get to pay lower fees as a result? If the fees are procedure-based and therefore not lowered, how does this model help anyone but the corporation, which can pay the nondentist less than a fully trained dentist?

Multiple forces are driving the rise in corporate dentistry. The most obvious is the enormous debts that new dental school graduates face. In addition, new graduates may seek a work-life balance that private practice sometimes can't offer. As a result, corporate models dangle the instant gratification of having time for home, family, and other activities, versus the delayed gratification of small business ownership, which previous generations enjoyed.

Interestingly, new dentists are not the only ones joining the corporate model; a number of mid- and late-career dentists also are entering corporate dentistry. The motivation for this appears to be freedom from running a practice, the chance to sell a practice but continue working reduced hours, or just a way in which to reinvent dentistry for them.

Ultimately, the objective for practicing dentistry should focus on the patient's best interest. A model that imposes any kind of decision-maker between the patient and the doctor interferes with the relationship for optimal health. Any model that has the objective of revenue over care is not focusing on the driver that has to be in play: the ensured health and safety of the American public.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Carter Brown'.

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