

5 minute Talk, August, 2006: Learning to Listen

I'd like to thank the Dean for letting me talk with you today. OK, let's get right down to it; I want to talk to you about the essence new curriculum, the big picture.

The aim of the new curriculum is to cultivate a more 3-dimensional understanding of dental medicine, so that you'll be able to connect the basic sciences to what you do in the clinic, and visa-versa. When you graduate, you will have developed a thick web of skills and knowledge, a solid foundation for well-integrated reasoning.

Central to this web of skills, I would say, is one skill. *You must learn to listen.* Perhaps this sounds easy, but it is no small task.

For example, right now, what do you hear? (**Dramatic pause; listen to babies wailing in audience.**)

That's right, the next generation. They are cheering you on. Cheering you on to be the best person, the best dentist you can be. The new curriculum will provide you this opportunity.

Your mission, should you chose to accept it, is to learn to listen. To listen with your eyes, your ears, your mind and your gut. To listen with your whole body, with your intuition. Then, develop a habit: listen for something that doesn't sound quite right—identify that area, and, instead of ignoring it—explore it and fully understand it. This is how you learn.

And this is what Problem Based Learning will require. It will help you be aware of what you *know* and what you *don't know*. Hopefully, this process will reinforce your curiosity. It will encourage you to take charge of your education and clarify those areas that are flat, blurry, or 2-dimensional.

There are other kinds of listening, too. Like listening to your patients and trying to understand their situation—so you can work with them as effectively as possible. Here at Case, you will see a wide range of patients: people of different ages, races and different states of health. You will learn to communicate well with all types of people. How? By keeping an open mind and listening to feedback from others. And then, considering this information, using it, and letting yourself grow and evolve.

How? By embracing the new curriculum.

You can all be excellent dentists. You can also be a relatively new kind of dentist. One who not only fixes their patient's teeth, but one who can understand each person's unique risk factors—factors that will in time lead to disease or lack of function—and you can coach your patients towards oral health before the damage occurs. You can actively promote oral health habits to prevent disease. Here at Case, you will learn how to do this.

There's something else. I was at the "Meet the Faculty Lunch" a few days ago, and already I heard a lot of talk about class rank. It's a game we've mastered: grades and numbers. Yes, grades are important; however, there is the drive to *do your best* and then there is the drive to *be your best*—and these are not necessarily the same thing.

It's true, we wouldn't be here if we weren't competitive, *but*—with the new curriculum, there's a new game: competing against yourself—if you can call it competing at all. It's more like Learning with a capital "L".

And because it's a new game, there *will* be a learning curve. So I hope that you will be patient. That is, patient with yourself and with others. The process may seem slow or frustrating at first, but it will also seem like this when you first pick up a hand piece and learn to drill. What's the point? Be patient and also work on the side of dentistry that's hard to measure. These are skills your patients will recognize readily. These are skills they will respect.

Many things are hard to measure. Take, for example, curiosity. As faculty, we have noticed in the past that first year dental students arrived to dental school curious and eager to learn. But then, maybe around second year—after students had been quizzed and tested *ad nauseam*, the "spark" began to fade. The new curriculum hopes to light that fire and keep it burning for the rest of your career. There you have it: "the inquiry thread".

So, really it's very simple. Keep your curiosity alive and learn to listen. If you do this, then the cheers from the next generation will be right on target.

Thank you and welcome to dental school!