

# VIEWPOINT

## Eileen Morrissey, RDH, MS



### *Red Letter Day*

A dentist whom I interviewed recently, Dr. George Duello, told me that since he became involved in implant dentistry in 1986, his specialty of periodontics has taken on an entirely new meaning for him. He was now helping patients to realize a profound, positive change in their lives, particularly patients who had worn removable prosthetics in the past. How did he know the impact it would have? He received letters from them.

I thought about this today when I checked my post office box. A wonderful letter had come in from Dr. Gabriel Dante Ariola, a general dentist from Brooklyn who had attended a lecture I presented. I had received my lecture evaluations and they were very positive; but no evaluation can hold a candle to the power of a personal message conveyed in a heart-felt letter. Letters such as these enable us to realize the value of what we do.

We all work so hard every day. When we know we have touched people's lives, we are immeasurably inspired to drive on, to rise above the petty drudgeries we face. Letters of appreciation touch our hearts. Since they don't come in with every patient every time, they are that much more special. It would be nice to receive a few more, wouldn't it?

How can we make that happen? Ladies and gentlemen, when was the last time you wrote to someone who had an impact on your life? Maybe it was a certain speaker; maybe it was a caregiver of some kind. Perhaps you had a conversation with a patient who profoundly influenced your perspective. If you didn't take a few moments to put your thoughts into words on paper, why not make a point of doing so the next time it happens to you?

There is an old saying, "What goes around, comes around." It's true. From a more practical standpoint, here is an idea for you to consider. You may not receive as many letters as you would like, but you surely get plenty of compliments. The next time this happens, look the patient straight in the eye and say, "Mrs. Patient, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Words like yours help me to realize why I do dentistry. Thank you. I would like to ask a favor. We are in the process of creating a testimonial booklet for our reception area. Our goal is to help patients who might have concerns about treatment or may be apprehensive in some way. Would you be willing to write a couple of paragraphs describing your experience here and how it was positive for you?"

You will find that your patients will be delighted to par-

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icipate. You also may involve your staff in this project by training them to ask patients to write letters when they receive compliments about the practice. Once you get a fair volume of letters, go ahead and create the booklet. Dr. Anthony Oliva, of Dorchester, Mass., created such an album for his reception area. He intends to include photography of some of his cases as well as full-face shots of “before” and “after.” The booklet has been a wonderful tribute to his patients’ experiences with the practice, as well as a showcase for his excellent dentistry.

A testimonial booklet such as this is a win-win for patients and the practice. It’s also an opportunity to honor deserving staff members, because some of the letters will invariably mention them. You will find that once you have the booklet in place, you will need to allow

room for expansion. As more and more patients read it, they are going to want to be included.

You must include all letters, in all forms, on all types of paper, with different themes, and in a variety of writing styles. Such variation is important and a tribute to the authenticity of the project. What I see, consistently, is sentiment that speaks from the patients’ collective hearts. As a doctor, you know how you feel when you receive one such letter — multiply that by 50, and your passion for patient care will be renewed every day!

**Practical suggestion** — In attaining your initial stack of letters, when you ask the patient to write one, put a time frame on it. For example, “Mrs. Patient, we are trying to have the album ready to use one month from now. Would it pose a hardship for you to write your letter within

the next two weeks?” (We learned from experience that if the project is left open-ended, some might not follow through.)

Once you have an album created and your momentum built up, the time frame is less significant because people are going to be motivated by seeing what you already have in place. They also will have an idea of what others have written, which, for whatever reason, seems important to some of them. They want to do it “correctly,” and may have been worried about not knowing what to write about.

The testimonial booklet project is gratifying in countless ways, and is truly beneficial to patients who are considering treatment. You, your team, and your patients are going to enjoy being involved in this one. Seize the opportunity!

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