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This column is for commentaries and letters to the editor shared by members. For information on how to submit an article, email Delaine Hall at delaine@gadental.org. In honor of August as back to school month, Dr. Van Haywood offers tips to dentists who allow prospective students to shadow them.

Shadowing and Admission Insights for Dental School

by Dr. Van B. Haywood*

Dentistry involves the use of the three Hs: Head, Hands and Heart. The Head stands for problem-solving conceptual abilities, the Hands stand for fine motor skills, and the Heart is passion and compassion. Grade point average (GPA) and dental aptitude test (DAT) scores are insightful about the potential of a future dental student, but numbers cannot show an admissions team if a prospective student has the Hs necessary to be a dentist. Often the only real evaluation of H-type skills occurs after an individual has been admitted to dental school and attempts dental procedures.

As part of the admission process, prospective dental students are expected to “shadow” a dentist or dentists to learn about the profession and see how patient treatment is rendered. However, shadowing can have limits. Watching a dentist does not help a potential student learn whether or not they possess the skill set to become a dentist, even if they desire to become a dentist. At the same time, the dentist who is being shadowed cannot evaluate the potential for the prospective student’s success unless the dentist can observe actual examples of hand skills. Observing the student performing procedures in the dental office and laboratory might be a way that both dentist and prospective student can discover the applicant’s potential abilities.

Is there a way to expand on the shadowing process to allow dentists to better counsel potential applicants? Can shadowing dentists who are already providing a valuable service increase their opportunities to learn about a prospective student’s hand skills and abilities should the shadowing dentist be asked to write a recommendation letter? I believe so.

The following examples replicate to me some of “Hand” experiences a student may experience in dental school. In addition to providing “Hands-on” exercises, there are enough interaction possibilities here to give the dentist and the student an idea about whether they like taking care of people (Heart), as well as have the Head knowledge to enjoy the profession.

11 Ways to Expand on the Dental Office Shadowing Experience

1. Have the student mix alginate and wipe into an impression tray or cup. If the dentist has an old dentoform or stone cast, the student could make an impression of the teeth (soak the cast in water first). If no dental-related casts exist, the student could fill a cup 1 inch deep with mixed alginate and place their finger in the cup to experience the set time and create a mold.
2. Once a prospective student has some type of alginate impression, they can try mixing and pouring dental stone into the impression without trapping bubbles. The more intricate the impression, the more revealing of technique to the student and dentist, so teeth molds are preferable.
3. When a “cup impression” is used of a finger, we can glean additional insights. When the set stone is removed from the poured alginate cup impression, the alginate can be removed from the cup and the dentist can determine the voids in the mix, and the adaptation to the cup/tray.
4. With stone casts, the prospective student can be allowed to trim stone using a model trimmer. The dentist may draw pencil lines for an outline to guide the trimming.
5. The student can make a small PVS impression of the face of a tooth form taken from a shade guide tab by injecting PVS into a flat short small box or small medicine jar lid, and laying the shade tab face down into the unset material. Once set, removal of the shade tab leaves a negative to replicate the anatomic crown of the tooth. Then the student can be allowed to incrementally add composite to the tooth mold and light-cure the material. As they add composite, then can incorporate a “handle” by placing a toothpick or cotton-tip applicator handle

between layers of composite, forming a lollipop-like design.

6. Once the tooth is built up to form, the student can remove this form from the PVS impression. Evaluation of smoothness of the adaptation, and lack of visible layers are helpful insights for the dentist.

7. With the composite tooth in hand, the material can be smoothed and contoured with a high speed handpiece. Carving a letter or circle of a certain depth in the face of the composite tooth can be insightful.

8. Using a single compule of composite, the student can dispense the contents onto a flat desktop and light-cure, creating a long strip of composite. Then they can use a series of disks (like Sof-Flex disks) in the following manner: a. Divide the long strip into four equal parts; b. Polish all four segments with the coarse disk, creating a long flat side to the strip; c. Polish the last three segments with the medium disk; d. Polish the last two segments with the fine disk; and e. Polish the last segment with the super-fine disk.

Now the student has created four segments of a surfaces which become progressively smoother. The dentist can ask them if they can feel the difference or see the difference in the surfaces.

9. The student could use a high speed handpiece to write their name on some tools or other metal objects. An inexpensive pair of scissors provides four surfaces for them to practice small writing and light touch with the handpiece.

10. The dentist may also consider chair side assisting as helpful experience to see how comfortable a student is in being aggressive enough to suction but tender enough to not damage soft tissue.

11. The student may also find value in pouring and trimming models in a dental or orthodontic laboratory, as these task can improve their hand skills and evaluations.

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