



Making the most of continuing education

Editor's Note: Guest columnist Dr. Brian LeSage appears this month in place of regular columnist Dr. Christopher Pescatore.

As a long-time participant in continuing education courses and conferences, I am not surprised at the impact they have on dentists. A well-organized course or conference can be an invigorating event, especially for dentists who have not explored far beyond what they learned in dental school. A conference exposes dentists to the newest techniques and products, as well as to leading innovators and a vibrant community of like-minded colleagues. For many dentists, the CE conference is an eye-opening experience that can radically change their dental practice philosophy.

But how can dentists get the most out of a conference? More importantly, how can they keep their enthusiasm and build on what they have learned after they leave? As co-chair of this year's American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry's Annual Scientific Session, I have reflected on these questions and would like to offer a few thoughts.

It goes without saying that the quality of presenters and the content of their lectures and courses determines much of a meeting's value for its attendees. But meetings and conferences offer much more than classroom content. For example, a conference is an excellent place to seek a mentor. If you find a particularly knowledgeable instructor who teaches a technique you would like to learn more about, ask the instructor if you can call or send an e-mail for advice on a regular basis. Many instructors are flattered by such requests, and generally are supportive and willing to help. A conference is also a great place to honestly compare your dentistry to that of a recognized leader in the profession. If you think your work does not stack up, through updated self-evaluation and the presenter's input, you can develop a strategy to move forward. The strategy may include a change in technique, materials, or maybe even a different lab.

Generally, CE conferences assemble professionals with like-minded interests and problems. It is a place where dentists can make friends and begin a dialogue about issues of mutual concern (e.g., the latest technologies, materials, techniques, practice management and lab support). The dialogue can continue after the conference through study groups, or simply by phone or e-mail. This collegial aspect of conferences and continuing education programs is often as important as the content. Dentists can save much effort and disappointment for themselves and patients by participating in ongoing dialogue with colleagues about procedures and technologies. Sustained

communication can enhance a dental school education and provide real-world experience to support or discount claims made in literature and by product manufacturers.

Although conferences often are inspiring, a weekend is only a weekend. If doctors really want to master complicated skills, they should follow up with more training. They can get this training from a variety of sources:

- *Affiliates of the AACD:* AACD affiliates are located nationwide and worldwide (see www.aacd.com/affiliates), and offer many educational programs.

- *Universities:* UCLA, LSU, NYU, and other dental universities offer continuum courses that often are scheduled across several weekends to accommodate busy dentists.

- *Teaching institutes:* Many prominent cosmetic dentists have established institutes to teach their specialties.

- *Study clubs:* A study club provides an excellent venue for focused exploration and dialogue among colleagues that keeps them current in the field. These groups exist throughout the country. The AACD Web site lists several.

- *Laboratories:* The leading labs, such as MicroDental and others that exhibit at the AACD conference, offer hands-on continuing education and training courses, plus information on new materials, technologies and procedures.

- *Internet programs:* Live, interactive programs are now available online. Internet courses usually follow one of two models. Dentists either "attend" the courses on computers located in their offices, or they gather with fellow dentists at laboratories or other sites. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. I think dentists enjoy learning with like-minded individuals. For many reasons, Web-based CE is the growing trend.

Dentists grow in their profession by attending courses and conferences that offer not only high-quality content but professional relationships, friendships, and practical dialogue. But it shouldn't end there. Applying the lessons learned and fostering the relationships made on an ongoing basis can help you continually improve your skills and build a thriving practice.

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