

I go to a friend

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We all know that doctors make the worst patients because they always laughingly tell us so. But how do we rate at taking our own medicine?

It is ever a problem, who does the repairer go to for his repairs? Where does the hairdresser get her hair cut? What happens when dentists need a check up?

The difficulty is that we tend to assume that they can't happen to us. Diseases I mean. Simply having been through dental school, merely having strutted the corridors of the clinics in white coat and a superior air was surely enough of itself to grant immunity. Not for us the likes of caries, perio pockets and any rare lurking nastinesses that afflict 'other' people. No, no, they hurry past our good selves, leaving us unscathed and untroubled. Well, not so.

The time comes sooner or later, or each six months for the amazingly fastidious, when we have, reluctantly, to go to a colleague for some treatment. There are those who attempt to 'do it themselves' of course. Hundreds of hours are spent rigging up elaborate, serried ranks of mirrors in carefully arranged configurations to enable the self-operator to manoeuvre even the simplest of probe and tweezer combinations. And how it all falls down, literally, as you try in vain to cut your own inlay prep through the haze of air-rotor spray, gallantly attempting to aspirate and watch at the same time.

No, no, ingenious as that solution might be there is only one thing to do, bite the bullet, call up the person you least distrust and ask, sheepishly, for an appointment. It is rather difficult at either end of the instrument. The 'dentist' has to assume both the 'I know what I'm doing here' confident approach as well as some humility of the 'oh dear, he remembers that I had to re-take my prosthetics practical exam twice' type.

For your part, as the 'patient' you have to take on a whole new set of values in which you have to nonchalantly wear the mantle of total trust. In fact, you are actually boiling inside with the fear that whatever happens he can't possible do as good a job as you would on yourself. If only you

could. So, you are both in that desperately artificial world of mutually pretending, especially to the dental nurse, that this is all terribly jolly, thoroughly routine and, frankly, a bit of a hoot, what?

However much you might be tempted though, avoid the trap of taking your own stuff with you. Little aggravates an operator more than the patient turning up with his or her supply of their 'favourite' instruments and preferred materials. The 'I don't know if you've tried this Wonder-Goo impression paste? I've brought some along for you to try' approach takes no

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hostages either. Be assured that your 'chum' will see through the ploy instantly and you'll be off on the wrong foot from the moment you open your duffel bag and fetch out the goodies.

The other temptation, which takes considerable nerve, is just to plunge in anonymously, following some preliminary research at least, at a likely looking practice where you are unlikely to be recognised, and claim that you are engaged in any other job, business or profession at all except dentistry. Then again be sensible. You'll get rumbled the instant that you tell the receptionist that you are a lion-tamer or deep-sea diver on oilrigs.

Ultimately though it boils down to the same result in the end, you are lying there, powerless and at the mercy of somebody

else and knowing exactly what you'd do in this situation so why is he, or she, doing something different. 'Surely he doesn't still use Hollenback carvers for amalgam?' A surge of horror powers through your veins. 'Does he really use only disposable instruments all the time or is it because it's me?' Remembering your 'role' you smile back wanly and blanch out your fears with a conciliatory comment like 'so, you've lost none of your traditional techniques I see, very refreshing to find someone with those old values.'

All the time thinking that it went out with the ark and you wish you could get up and leave. But you can't, you're a patient, remember? Now you understand what they are feeling, except that they wouldn't know the difference between a Hollenback and a Flat Plastic if you drew them a diagram. They'd just be worried that it didn't hurt. As indeed you are. What is his local anaesthetic technique like? What, no surface anaesthetic paste first. You should perhaps have brought your own after all. Fancy not having Bubble Gum flavour.

By the time you've rinsed out and observed the white of the spittoon from closer quarters than you've seen for many a long day, it doesn't seem to have been so bad after all. But then comes the really embarrassing bit if you haven't agreed it beforehand. How to pay. Indeed, do you pay? Is this gratis, on the house as a gesture of professional friendship or on a 'knock-for-knock' basis where he'll be back round to your place next week for a scale and polish? Or is it cash on the nail? Any discount? Excruciating or what, as you hover about from foot to foot in front of reception not knowing whether to whip out the plastic or to nip across the road and treat the practice to a huge bunch of flowers instead? Me? Oh no, I go to a friend.

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