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Few things are as important as truth

"And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free..." ~ JOHN VIII-XXXII

This quote from the book of John is inscribed on the lobby wall of the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and I think of it often while treating patients.

In clinical endodontics, as with all science, few things are as important as truth.

Our essential sworn duty is to "do no harm." We risk no greater harm to our patients than when we proceed on the basis of assumption, presumption, or habit, without first doing everything we can to ascertain the truth of our patient's condition.

Fortunately, we have tools today that allow us to see more, appreciate more, and evaluate more of a patient's condition than ever before.

My first epiphany in this realm was while still practicing general dentistry. My insatiable quest for continuing education took me to Santa Barbara, California, under the guidance of Dr. Cliff Ruddle. It was there that I first looked through a dental operating microscope. I was literally AMAZED!

French author Marcel Proust once observed, "The true voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." As soon as I integrated a dental microscope into my general practice and peered through the lenses, I understood the truth of Proust's wisdom.

Thanks to the lighting and magnification of the scope, I was seeing the closest thing possible to the truth of my patient's condition. Now I could see, with vivid clarity, every tooth margin. I looked, in intimate detail, at things that I saw clinically...but had not really seen.

Shortly, I came to realize another truth: we cannot treat what we cannot see. And the better we can see it, the better we can treat it.

Proper use of the microscope impacts everyone involved in patient care: the clinician who immediately gains confidence, the assistant (hopefully utilizing the assistant's binoculars) who can better anticipate and understand the clinical conditions and needs, the office staff who know that their clinicians are providing the most well-informed care possible, and of course, the patients themselves who benefit from potentially reduced chair time, reduced pain and discomfort, decreased recovery times, and less risk of the need for future treatment.

While attending graduate school at Boston University, my mentor, Dr. Herb Schilder, sometimes referred to me as "The Virus," because I was so excited about new dental technologies — and I was all too eager to share that enthusiasm with my classmates, my teachers, and anyone else who would listen. But the truth is that my love affair is not really with technology itself, but with what I can do with it. And that still holds true today. The things that we are able to do today with technology in dentistry are truly amazing.

Without question, I consider the dental operating microscope the single most important piece of technology that I have incorporated into my practice.

Like the microscope, which I discovered purely by accident, more recently, Cone Beam Computed Tomography (CBCT) has proven to be a practice game changer for me. And like the microscope, it has transformed both the way that I practice and the way that I think about truth.

I never anticipated the impact that visualizing dental anatomy in 3D would have on my staff, my patients, my practice, and me. CBCT has literally changed the way that I approach clinical endodontics.

This technology is the epitome of John's verse: it represents three-dimensional truth, and the freedom to treat patients confidently, creatively, and effectively because of the truth it provides.

CBCT allows me to visually strategize the clinical execution of a procedure before I actually do it, whether it's endodontic therapy, a careful manipulation of the Schneiderian membrane for a sinus lift, or the placement of a dental implant — either done "free hand" or utilizing CBCT's DICOM data to create a computer-generated surgical guide.

Beyond visualizing the anatomy prior to the procedure, having the 3D scan on a large high-resolution monitor chairside provides a true representation of the operating space, and an incredible level of pretreatment confidence along with it.

Procedures that once were difficult and created significant pretreatment anxiety for doctor, staff, and patient are now commonplace and are executed with ease. To the benefit of all, with CBCT we can digitally document the entire scope of a procedure, from initial evaluation, through treatment planning, and eventually, years of follow-up. This gives us the great luxury of going back to review past cases and learn from our own experiences, as well as to provide extensive treatment feedback to our referring doctors and the colleagues with whom we consult.

With today's technologies, endodontic professionals are closer than ever to attaining that ultimate scientific pursuit of truth. New tools and ever-evolving technologies add limitless stimulation to the practice careers of those who embrace them, and ultimately set us free in the greatest way imaginable: by giving us the freedom to continue to grow at what we do best, for our patients, our colleagues, and ourselves.



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