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**Confessions of a Continuing Education Junkie:
How I survived an Excruciatingly Boring Dental Lecture**

We've all experienced it. We're embarrassed to discuss it. The phenomenon causes us to question our own sanity and that of our beloved profession.

I'm referring, of course, to having the misfortune of registering for an Excruciatingly Boring Dental Lecture.

How does one successfully survive through such a program? Being prepared is of paramount importance: assume the course you're taking is going to be boring, and, even before you help yourself to a complimentary cup of coffee, pick the right place to sit.

Choosing a Proper Seat

Although there are many theories as to what constitutes the best seat, trust my recommendations, because I've given this subject a lot of thought.

First, if you have a choice of sitting at a table, or sitting auditorium-style, race ahead of any other colleagues, step over them if you have to, but make absolutely sure you get a seat at one of the tables. There is simply no

substitute for being able to rest your elbows on a tabletop for the purpose of supporting your head during a boring lecture.

Second, about one third of the way back from the podium seems about right. Too close to the speaker, and you risk looking like the goody-goody type of student we all hated in dental school. Even worse, you may be forced to maintain eye contact with the lecturer. This would be especially awful if you knew him, and might feel obligated to nod your head sagely or smile appreciatively from time to time.

Too far back in the auditorium, and you become like the guy in dental school who always sat in the last row reading a newspaper while drinking coffee, who never had an assignment ready on time, but yet graduated along with everyone else. Besides, you may actually wish to hear the speaker and see some of his slides.

All factors considered, one third of the way from the front, two thirds of the way from the back, seems best.

Third, if there's a seat next to a wall, grab it. Being able to lean against the wall while extending your legs can feel like heaven. If the wall has a window, that would be an added benefit. What you see through the window may turn out to be much of much greater interest than anything going on at the podium.

Finally, and this is more subtle, try to position yourself so that while you have a perfect, unobstructed view of the speaker and screen, if needed, a slight, unobtrusive shift in your body posture would be able to render you absolutely invisible to the speaker. During a truly horrendous presentation, the ability to be anonymous is highly desirable.

Off to a Bad Start

On this particular day, I knew I was in trouble as soon as the speaker flashed his second slide on the screen, and began to read from the slide, very slowly and very meticulously.

“A proper treatment plan...” intoned the speaker. His sonorous voice successfully read every line of small text on every one of his slides, flawlessly.

To avoid embarrassing myself by falling asleep, I needed a plan of action to keep my mind occupied. I decided to try closing my eyes and only listening to his voice; I alternated with surreptitiously cupping my hands over my ears and reading the slides myself.

Unfortunately, I quickly grew bored with this game.

“In evaluating the periodontium,” he continued his reading with perfect enunciation, “one must identify the free gingiva, muco-gingival margin, interdental papillae...”

I marveled that he didn't skip a single word of the prodigious amount of text on his many slides.

I decided to find a new way to keep myself amused. I tried watching the slides through one eye at a time. By first closing my right eye and reading with my left, and then closing my left eye while reading with my right, I discovered that I was able to make the text jump from side to side on the screen.

Moreover, I discovered that with my new progressive glasses (alas, a sign of my advancing years), I could tilt my head down and see the print on the slides with greater clarity, and then, tilt my head back and see the same print appear magnified.

I was having a fine time, experimenting with varying degrees of clarity and magnification, while blinking one eye closed and then the other, when I was stopped cold: I suddenly realized that the dentist in the chair next to me was staring at me with evident concern.

“Don't worry! I'm not having an epileptic seizure,” I felt like saying to him.

But, he looked so concerned and serious, that I merely smiled at him reassuringly while shrugging my shoulders. I did notice, however, that he moved his chair, ever so slightly, away from me and toward the dentist on his other side.

The Speaker Tells a Joke

Perhaps the speaker began to sense that he was losing his audience's attention, because, just then, he decided to say something personable and humorous.

"If my beeper goes off during the lecture and you see me jump," he remarked, "don't worry. It's just that my wife is expecting any minute now."

"What are the odds of her water breaking right now?" I mentally calculated, as I doodled on the notepad that was distributed to all the attendees.

I watched the speaker as he droned on. I stared at him intently, and he began to look kind of wooden, like a dental version of Al Gore. He didn't move at all, or evidence any signs of life, except for his lips moving as he read the slides, his laser pointer moving inexorably along the text, keeping pace with his recitation.

I felt like screaming to my stuporous colleagues all around me, “Hey! Let’s all follow his laser pointer and sing along with the text!”

Perhaps the speaker sensed a certain pervasive unease in the room. Perhaps he heard snoring. In any event, he apparently decided that the lecture could be improved.

“These slides are hard to read,” he intoned, “can someone dim the lights?”

“No! No!” I screamed inwardly, “DO NOT DIM THE LIGHTS!”

“Is the chairman here?” he requested, “Can you please dim the lights so that the slides are easier to read?”

“No! Please, please, please! Anything but dim the lights,” my inner voice beseeched.

Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?

The speaker, who by now I had nicknamed “The Sandman,” continued with rooms lights very low. The slides were clearer, but tired, uninspired dentists were nodding off all around me.

I decided to try and stay awake by studying different colleagues in the room. There was one fellow in the front row who hadn’t stopped taking notes from the minute the speaker was introduced. He had completely filled

one notepad and looked around helplessly for more paper. The dentist next to him magnanimously passed him her brand-new, unused notepad. He continued writing furiously. I think he also wrote down that the speaker's wife was pregnant and expecting any minute.

By now, the speaker, on his second slide carousel, had successfully anesthetized many of my colleagues. The fellow next to me was actually snoring.

Suddenly, I realized, with horror, that the speaker was staring right at me, and talking to me. He was motioning to the hard-working, peacefully-dreaming dentist next to me.

“Say,” he requested of me, “can you please wake him up?”

I felt like answering, “You put him to sleep! You wake him up!”

But, ever the congenial fellow, I smiled and squeezed the elbow of my sleeping colleague. He awoke with a start and looked at me suspiciously. I smiled innocuously, but I noticed that he moved his chair a little further from me and closer to the dentist on his other side.

I continued to search for ways to keep myself awake and interested. I overheard a conversation between the older, gray-haired dentist behind me, and his very young, very pretty hygienist. He was explaining that every

procedure that he did in his own office was either better than or just as good as, the speaker's.

The robotic voice of the lecturer droned on.

I once read that very dominant, powerful personality types (I count myself among them) often find that their body language is emulated by others. I decided to experiment. I leaned far back in my chair, arms folded in front of me. Sure enough, two other dentists at my table leaned back, their arms folded.

I leaned forward, elbows on the table, palms cradling my cheeks. Disappointingly, only one other dentist copied me. I tried some other positions, but soon grew weary with the effort.

The lecture went on, despite the lethargy palpably emanating from the audience.

I idly wondered, "If someone were to carry the speaker out of the room, and the slides continued to flash on the screen, would we all continue to sit here, like sheep, waiting for the chairman to announce a coffee break?"

No Break

Unexpectedly, the lecturer stopped reading his slides. He made a great display of raising his wrist to his eyes, looking at his watch, and asking, “Would anyone mind if we skipped the break? I’ve got a lot of material to cover.”

“No, No, No,” I screamed, sheepishly, to myself, “PLEASE do not skip the break!”

The speaker continued, “If we skip the break, then, I promise that I can finish fifteen minutes earlier.”

“Don’t fall for that!” I tried to mentally project my thoughts into my colleagues’ minds, “It’s a trick! He won’t finish early! He’ll never finish!”

“So, what do you think, skip the break?” he asked, as those of us who were awake all stared back silently. Apparently sensing a consensus from our torpid countenances, he concluded, “Okay, if you say so, we’ll skip the break.”

I turned to look at the old dentist and his attractive hygienist behind me. She had fallen asleep. Her head was tilted back, and she was snoring like a drunken sailor. It wasn’t a pretty sight. I saw a gold inlay on her upper left second molar.

The lecturer read, “Following these procedures, can result in the highly undesirable result of leaving the patient with a long, junctional epithelium.”

I longed for human contact. I leaned over to the fellow next to me and said congenially, “Good gawd! Nawt the dweaded long junctional epithelium!”

I pride myself on making friends easily. My neighbor, however, looked at me very strangely and moved his chair further away from me. By now, he was practically sitting on the lap of the dentist on his other side.

I looked across the room. My friend, George, was staring at the screen with his eyes open, but I could tell that he was sleeping. I envied his ability to nap with his eyes open and a sincere expression on his face.

Eventually, the lecturer reached the “I’d-better-hurry-up-because-I’m-running-out-of-time” phase of his lecture, and he began clicking his slide changer furiously and racing through his material.

For me, this was the most enjoyable part of the lecture as I enjoyed the psychedelic effect of the kaleidoscope of flashing colors and images jumping off the screen. I wondered if this is what Brooklyn College in the 1960’s would have been like for me, had I chosen to skip studying organic

chemistry and participate in certain parties that featured the distribution of illegal substances.

“I’ve got some very exciting material coming up,” said the speaker, while studying his wristwatch, “would anyone mind if I went five or ten minutes overtime?”

“Ha! I knew it!” shrieked my inner voice.

Not waiting for a reply from his captive audience, the speaker finished with a flourish as he concluded with the “Look-at-the-stuff-that-only-I-can-do, so-you’re-better-off-referring-patients-to-me,” section of his presentation.

All the somnambulant dentists filed silently out of the room, waiting on line for Proof of Attendance cards. I noticed that the fellow who had been constantly taking notes in the front row had now cornered the speaker behind his podium, presumably to check on some material he may have missed during the lecture. I prayed that he would bore the speaker with countless inane questions. Poetic justice.