

Everything I Needed to Know about Dentistry I Learned from Scuba Diving

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When a dentist develops an enjoyable, enduring recreational interest outside of dentistry, it is very fortunate; when that passion also teaches valuable lessons that relate to dentistry, it is absolutely providential.

After spending three decades scuba diving around the globe, I can easily apply what I have learned to everyday dentistry.

Be Conservative

All divers learn to appreciate the importance of conservation and become dedicated environmentalists early in their diving careers. After floating serenely over a beautiful coral formation and admiring the shapes and colors of all the local flora and fauna, a diver is repulsed by the sight of man-made damage.

A beautiful coral formation marred by a thoughtless tourist who breaks off a souvenir, an uprooted sea fan uprooted by the carelessly placed fin of a careless

diver, a destructive swath cut through a healthy reef by a recklessly placed anchor, are all anathema to preservation-minded divers.

The mantra among divers is, “Leave only your bubbles, and take away only your photos.” So too, a dentist should not plan for wholesale changes in the oral environment without careful thought and analysis.

Full coverage for teeth that are better served with minimally invasive dentistry? Better think twice. In scuba diving and in dentistry, less invasive intervention is often better.

Find a Good Buddy

Enjoyment of an under-the-sea adventure is greatly enhanced if experienced with a good friend. Good diving buddies share the same interests, indulge each other’s eccentricities, learn from and watch out for each other, and enjoy each other’s company.

Similarly, having a good dental buddy will improve a dentist’s quality of life. It’s crucial to have an understanding friend who will sympathize with your professional insecurities and share common frustrations, fallibilities, and

concerns. It is a content and healthy dentist who can attend continuing education courses with a dental comrade and laugh together about mutual problems.

Plan Ahead

Before jumping into the water, responsible divers listen to a detailed briefing of the dive site, carefully study sea conditions, and “Plan the dive and dive the plan.” And, because underwater communication is so problematic, if a plan does require modification after the dive has begun, it’s crucial to have excellent communication skills, and agreed-upon signs and indications.

Correspondingly, before starting treatment, a responsible dentist will carefully study all the relevant factors and make certain that he properly communicates the plan to his team and to his patient. And, if ensuing developments necessitate altering the plan, clear and lucid communication will avoid a host of potential problems.

Be Prepared for Emergencies

In dentistry and in scuba diving, there exists a latent but very real prospect for encountering an emergency situation. By constantly reviewing and reinforcing the basic science and emergency procedures, properly checking and maintaining equipment, keeping good records, and upgrading skills, both a dentist and a diver assure that their activities will remain safe, enjoyable, and catastrophe-free.

Don't Swim with Sharks

This should be self-evident. Although it is unhealthy to have an obsessive fear of underwater and above-water sharks, it is equally unhealthy to ignore their potential for harm.

When divers encounter a shark, or group of sharks, it is a memorable thrill. Admiring their grace, strength, and beauty is an unforgettable event and transforms a routine dive into a treasured adventure. But, a wise saying among divers is, "There are bold divers and there are old divers, but there are no bold, old divers." Safety first is the accepted maxim. Sensible divers will take pleasure in the sudden appearance of sharks, but will scrupulously avoid provoking them.

Careful dentists will recognize that there are litigious-minded human sharks that should similarly be left alone. This is certainly not a denunciation of lawyers; attorneys are generally intelligent, well-read and well-informed individuals who make excellent patients. Human sharks are those individuals, whether lawyer or laymen, who live to ascribe fault to others.

Experienced dentists can discern the danger of hiring a prospective employee who spends the entire interview criticizing previous employers, or accepting as a patient the individual who is certain that all of his or her dental problems are the result of the avarice and incompetence of previous dentists.

A prudent diver or dentist pays attention when his instincts scream, “Stay away from that shark!”

Remember that Everyone Need a Hygienist

A diver will often swim right past an underwater cleaning station without even realizing it. In prime example of a symbiotic relationship, grouper fish often congregate in a location known as a cleaning station. There, they float motionless with their mouths wide open, while tiny shrimp crawl around within and pick up and remove food debris.

In this instance of commensalism, the grouper gets a free cleaning and the shrimp gets a free meal.

In our dental offices, a smart dentist recognizes that, generally speaking, a good hygienist will greatly enhance the quality of his patient's care, and, at the same time, improve his enjoyment of dentistry. Hygienists, for the most part, have more time, skill, and interest in providing routine root planing, scaling, and preventive services.

The Dive or the Drill?

In dentistry and in diving, practitioners take pleasure in meeting diverse individuals from all walks of life and value their opportunity to meet folks that would otherwise never cross their path.

The residual question that I have is, did my dentistry make me a better diver, or did my diving make me a better diver? I really can't decide, but I'm willing to take the plunge.