

***Novocaine Will Not Put You to Sleep***

*(Our intrepid Component News Reporter attends a press screening of a new film about a dentist, and interviews the director/writer)*

“Oh, no,” I groaned, “not another movie making fun of dentists!”

I had been reading in the paper that a new movie, *Novocaine*, was about to be released, starring Steve Martin, as dentist Frank Sangster.

“Great,” I complained to my wife, “how is he going to portray the dentist? Like the demented dentist he played in *Little Shop of Horrors*? Or, perhaps, a socially inept loser? A comic foil?”

I wondered if any of my colleagues had made Steve Martin gag on a fluoride tray when he was a youngster, and if this was his way of getting even with us. I decided that one of the 140,000 dentists in the United States ought to stand up and do something about this, and that I was just the person for the job.

I called the publicity department of Artisan Entertainment Productions, and informed them, with the full weight of the New York State

Dental Association behind me, that I was planning to review *Novocaine* for our dental journal, and that the film had better not contain any material deleterious to dentistry.

To my surprise, they were delighted. Jodie Magid, Manager, East Coast Publicity, invited me to attend a private press screening and arranged for me to have a private interview with the film's Director and Writer, David Atkins.

"You're going to love meeting him," she promised, "he comes from a large family of dentists." I prepared for the screening and interview by reading everything that I could find about the film and its director.

*For the entire week preceding the screening, I had the same recurring dream. I was standing on line with beautiful, fashionably-dressed people all around me. Velvet ropes separated us from wildly cheering fans, held back by scores of uniformed police. Photographic bulbs and strobe lights were flashing all around us. My beautiful wife was on my arm, dressed in the kind of fashion designer gown that you see exotic actresses wear on Oscar Night.*

*Three teenyboppers, armed with autograph books, rushed up to us.*

*"Is he anybody?" asked the first.*

*"No," answered the second, pointing to my wife, "he's with her."*

*The third one muttered, "Yeech! He looks like a dentist!"*

*As we moved slowly toward the entrance, two security guards, armed with walkie-talkies and a portable computer, were checking everyone on the line.*

*“Clive Barnes, New York Times,” said one gentleman.*

*“John Simon, New York magazine,” said another.*

*“Lou Lumenick, New York Post,” said a third.*

*The guard gestured to me. “Jeffrey Galler, New York State Dental Journal,” I said. My voice came out strange, like Dudley the Dragon in the American Dental Association film classic, “Help Dudley Fight Tooth Decay.”*

*I could hear one guard mutter to his friend, “This guy looks like a dentist.”*

Fortunately, the real press screening was nothing like that. My wife and I were ushered into a very small, very private, very plush screening room on Broadway and 48<sup>th</sup> street in Manhattan’s theater district.

I’m happy to report that the film is a thoroughly enjoyable crime thriller, and that the dentist, Dr. Frank Sangster (Steve Martin) is portrayed as a very likeable, sympathetic character.

According to the very accurate and detailed press notes, “Frank is living the American Dream. Blessed with a thriving dental practice and a

sleek, modernist home, he is happily engaged to his dental hygienist. His perfectly managed life quickly unravels, however, when a seductive new patient settles into his dentist chair.”

The ensuing story, about a very straight and basically honest character led astray by a femme fatale, contains many surprises and twists. Dr. Sangster is led into a seedy underworld of sex, drugs, and murder.

Several important plot devices, involving the use of forensic dentistry, actually seem somewhat plausible and feasible. I don't wish to reveal any cinematic surprises, but the dentistry is much more believable than that shown in other recent films.

During a press conference with the assembled movie critics and journalists following the screening, Director David Atkins revealed that his father and two brothers are all general dentists practicing in Boston, and that he did most of his research for the movie and his writing of the script, while posing as a dental assistant in his father's office. In fact, the actor, Steve Martin, also spent considerable time in the office, learning how to mimic the motions and body language of a dentist performing different procedures.

In answer to one journalist's question, he answered that he was strongly influenced by Alfred Hitchcock's oft-used idea of having a hero run afoul of the law, who then must “run for his life in order to save himself.”

Following the press conference, a security guard pointed me out to a public relations assistant, saying, “He looks like the dentist,” and led me into a private room for my meeting with David Atkins.

After Atkins asked me if I really was a dentist, I set up my tape recorder and asked him why he chose “*Novocaine*” as the title, inasmuch as novocaine (prilocaine) hasn’t been used in this country for the past 30 years, having been replaced by the more reliable and stable lidocaine and mepivacaine.

“In fact,” I continued, “you should have called the movie *Two Percent Lidocaine with 1:100,000 Epinephrine*.”

The director politely pretended to be intrigued by my suggestion, and explained that the word “novocaine” is used generically by the general public in much the same way that one would say that they were going to “Xerox” some papers even though their copier might be from a very different manufacturer.

He explained that the title “*Novocaine*” symbolized that the dentist was “sleepwalking through life, unaware of the rot that lies beneath the surface of the dentist’s seemingly perfect world.”

In fact, this recurring idea of probing beneath the surface of things, is accentuated during the opening credits and at various times throughout the

film, by the appearance of radiographic skulls chewing, swallowing, and conversing with each other. These images, which give the film an edgy, creepy quality, serve also as a metaphor for what's happening beneath the surface of the dentist's "perfect" life.

My wife, a speech therapist, observed that she recognized some of the images from a 1950's study of human subjects' swallowing. These studies are outlawed today, because of excessive radiographic exposure.

"You're absolutely correct," agreed Atkins, "we took some images from that study, but the rest are simulations created digitally by computer."

He related that when he was a child, many family dinners at home were interrupted by phone calls to his dentist-father from "emergency patients" trying to con his father into prescribing narcotic medications. He also recalled how he spent much time in his father's office surrounded by denture models and illuminated radiographs. All these experiences helped formulate his ideas for the movie's story.

I politely complained to him. "Coming from a dental family," I asked, "why do you have the seductive patient (Helena Bonham-Carter) tell Dr. Frank Sangster that she set him up for a drug con scheme rather than using a physician, because 'Dentists are easier; they're dumber.' And," I persisted, "Why does she have to say, 'You're kind of sweet, in a dentist sort of way?'" "

Atkins hung his head down and lamented, “Yeah, my brother complained about that also. He said to me, very loudly, at the first screening, ‘Thanks a lot, Davey!’ ”

“Actually,” he continued, “I wrote this script as my love song to dentists and dentistry.” I looked at him carefully to see if he was serious.

He really meant it. “I think dentists are contemporary heroes,” he explained, “because they epitomize the American Dream. People are wary of dentists and go out of their way to avoid them, and dentists are aware of this. But instead of being bitter or mean-spirited, the dentists welcome them with open arms. Their only goal is to take away people’s pain and make them attractive and healthy.”

He went on to discuss that when he made the film, he was super-concerned about how dentists and dental professionals would respond. “I didn’t want people to think in any way, shape, or form that this was against dentists or dentistry,” he said.

“I wanted,” he continued, “to go against the cliché of the dentist as nerdy or goofy.”

“Or boring,” added my wife, helpfully. I kicked her leg under the table.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he laughed, “that’s why I said, ‘Let’s put Steve Martin in really cool clothes, and let’s have him drive a really cool vehicle, a 1972 Citroen, and let’s put him in a cool, sophisticated house with good art.’ I wanted to portray the dentist as urbane and sophisticated, specifically to go against the cliché.”

Atkins revealed to us that two of the film’s actresses were fitted with prosthetic teeth. “I wanted the dental hygienist (Laura Dern) to have perfect, superficial, Farrah Fawcett teeth. She epitomizes the ‘can-do’ California girl, the ideal of perfection. She’s sweet, beautiful, loving, apple pie, lemonade, America.”

The seductive patient, Susan Ivey (Helena Bonham Carter) had to be fitted with teeth that looked like a street-person who cons drugs. “It was a tough balance,” explained Atkins, “because she had to look bad, but not too bad. She still had to look beautiful, attractive, and sexy.”

As my wife and I were saying our good-byes to the director, his assistant, and the public relations staff, my irrepressible wife sidled up to David Atkins and asked coquetishly, “If your film is nominated for an Oscar, can you invite me to the Oscar Night Ceremonies?”

Atkins’ face broke into a huge smile. “Absolutely! You’ll be my guest!” he promised.

While I was driving home, my wife fell asleep in the passenger seat. After being married for 29 years, I could tell exactly what she was dreaming about. Accordingly, I began to calculate how many implants I would have to place in order to afford a suitable, designer gown for my wife on Oscar Night.

I also thought about the three haunting questions that the movie raised. First, do all prosperous, seemingly happy dentists secretly long to leave it all behind, for a life of romance and danger?

Second, and even more importantly, are all Drug Enforcement Agents passive aggressives with horribly discolored teeth?

And, third, the most disturbing question of all, are all dentists so easily manipulated by their hygienists?

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**(Sidebar—insert box)**

### **Spot the Dental Faux Pas Contest**

Can you spot “Dental Mistakes” in the movie, *Novocaine*? We invite readers to write to the NYS Dental Journal with their findings. For example:

\*Would a dental assistant in a well-staffed and well-organized office neglect to place a bib over the low-cut dress and exposed cleavage of a

seductive new patient? Would the dentist examine her without the presence of an auxiliary? No way.

\*Would a dentist examine a new patient without first reviewing her health history? Certainly no member of the New York State Dental Association would!

\*Would a clinician make a treatment plan of “Root Canal Therapy” without first taking a radiograph? I think not.

\*Would a conscientious dental hygienist who is obsessive compulsive about office cleanliness break infection control protocol by removing her face mask and kissing the dentist over a supine patient? Horrors, no.

Director David Atkins explained that he tried to get as close as he could to reality, but that a lot of veracity and continuity is lost on the floor of the editing room.

I’m sure he’s right. But, nevertheless, the editors will award suitable prizes (signed movie posters, *Novocaine* mugs and memorabilia, and microwave popcorn) for the best entries!

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