

## What is “Holistic” Anyway?

As you may know from some of my previous articles, I believe that it is important to understand the true meaning of words and how there can be alternative definitions, such as the word “diagnosis” which was the subject of my article in our Winter 2012 newsletter. This is especially true of words when one is seeking a new dentist through word of mouth, a website, or online guides such as Yelp or Angie’s List. Many people are searching for dental offices that practice “holistic” dentistry, but what does it really mean to be a holistic dental practice?

The dictionary\* definition of the word “holistic” is, “concerned with all factors, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual that affect health, rather than treating isolated diseases and symptoms.” I can think of no better designation of the nature of services we offer at The Dental Wellness Center than the term “holistic.” Obviously we treat the physical (and do so at the highest possible level), as all dental treatment ultimately deals with physical aspects of the body. Mental and emotional for sure, because we take the time to listen to people, and based upon the many, many stories I hear from new patients through the years regarding their past dental experiences, some are good, but unfortunately, the preponderance are negative. This is something that we are very tuned into when treating our patients. And the spiritual, in that we involve ourselves with the spirit of the patient, making a connection, not just treating his or her “teeth.”

Through the years, after thousands of interviews with new patients, I have learned a lot about people and how they perceive dentistry, which is usually based upon their past dental care experiences. I have learned that patients view dentistry much differently than do dentists. Not having gone through dental school and the experiential background required of a dentist, most patients aren’t looking through the same “prism” as the dentist, so there is a big gap of knowledge and understanding. This factor is one of the main reasons why The Dental Wellness Center has a central mission of educating its patients. It is also the reason that I consider my initial new patient interviews so important, as they are invaluable in getting to know my patients and it also sets the stage for a healthy continuing relationship. This is key to a philosophy of practicing holistic dentistry.

I have also learned through the years that the finest dentistry possible for a patient includes a combination of many other factors on the part of the dentist:

- The passion of the dentist to continue learning about health
- Wellness, health-centered outlook, i.e., a focus on discovering the cause of conditions rather than solely treating them
- Wanting to do the right thing
- Degree of actual caring for people
- Innate talent and dexterity of the dentist honed through clinical and post graduate experience
- A grounded philosophy of care
- An understanding of the teeth and gums being only part of a vast network of other oral system elements that all need work in harmony for sustained health
- Use of non-toxic, biologically compatible materials
- Empathetic approach to individual differences in people, their mouths and teeth
- An exceptional team of co-workers with similar values
- A holistic approach - Which brings us back to the central theme and title of this article – “What is “Holistic?” and the importance of word definitions.

I don’t think that there is a better summation of holistic dentistry than that expressed by Bernie Siegel, M.D. when he said “.. As counselors, teachers, healers, and caregivers, we can always contribute... a cooperative arrangement in which the doctor and patient both realize that they are essentially the same except for a few years training, offers more to both than the accustomed roles of master and supplicant. This expanded outlook allows the doctor to inspire hope, give with the heart as well as the head and hands. Keep ego in the background and share major decisions with the patient. The doctor who works out of love doesn’t burn out. He/she may get tired physically, but not emotionally. We doctors must become as instruments. When that happens, motivated patients will use us to work miracles.” \**Thorndike & Barnhart Dictionary*  
These words are what define us and drive us to achieve excellence as holistic practitioners at The Dental Wellness Center.