

MY APPROACH AND PHILOSOPHY ON DENTISTRY

written by Dr. Michael Fleming

It never ceases to amaze me how the dreams of one's youth can manifest into adult realities. I can remember as a young boy imagining myself as a college athlete, a pilot and a surgeon never knowing at the time the path my life would ultimately take. It turned out I wound up playing basketball at the college level, became a Marine pilot and ultimately a dentist. All of the experiences that preceded my entry into the dental profession have helped shape an emerging philosophy of life and patient care over these many years of clinical practice.

One of the most important lessons I gleaned from my college and military years was to learn how to think critically and independently. If my experience is any indication, most of what I thought I knew about something was largely reflective of what someone else told me. It became clear to me that not all I was told or taught was necessarily inviolable truth. This was distressing and disappointing to me at first but now I find it rather liberating to know there are many, often non-traditional ways of addressing problems and circumstances.

When I was confronted with new ways of thinking, doing and being, the challenge came in choosing whether or not to embrace and internalize life principles that were radically different than any I had known before. At times, changes like this involved totally rejecting old ways of thinking and embracing those that were entirely new.

There was nothing more professionally challenging and unsettling early on in my career as a dentist than raising serious questions about the safety of the materials and products I was routinely using or installing on a daily basis. It became very apparent to me that mercury-containing fillings, for example, had a long and checkered history of scientific disputes over their alleged health effects. After a long period of study and soul searching, I elected to cease offering mercury-containing fillings otherwise known as dental amalgam as a treatment option many years ago. The jury is still out on a direct association between mercury contained in dental amalgam and any untoward health effects. However, the decision to eliminate dental amalgam as a restorative option was the best choice for me given my understanding of the existing science. It was less a matter of being right or wrong about the matter of amalgam safety than embracing what I thought was the most honorable and sensible approach to patient care.

These kinds of difficult decisions are reflective of a patient-centered approach to dental care, which has been my focus since entering the dental profession. To me, this means maintaining a central focus on the patient's needs and taking a minimally invasive approach whenever possible that preserves tooth substance and is cost-effective.

Treatment recommendations that have the best opportunity for a successful outcome are a collaborative effort between the doctor and patient in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. I would not want it any other way.