

THE DILEMMA OF DR. VERLE GARDNER

**Thomas Ravenel
Lauren Elizabeth Kuhn**

Medical University of South Carolina

Dr. Verle Gardner is a middle-aged dentist working in a private practice in Colorado. Dr. Gardner has been practicing dentistry for many years and is accustomed to reviewing health histories and creating patient treatment plans. One Monday morning, he sees that Mrs. Christine Nara—a longtime patient who is approximately his age—is scheduled for a dental exam and consultation for a procedure that would be performed by another dentist in the same clinic. He anticipates a quick, simple appointment.

“You can’t put that in my dental chart!” exclaimed Mrs. Nara.

Dr. Gardner paused and wondered what he should do.

THE APPOINTMENT

It was Monday morning and the schedule was full of longtime patients. It was supposed to be an uneventful way to start the week.

“Good morning, Mrs. Nara, how are you today?” Dr. Gardner asked, as he brought Mrs. Nara to the clinic room for her appointment.

“I’m doing well. It’s always nice to see you. I’ve been a bit stressed recently, but soon my smile will be one less issue to worry about!” she said.

Dr. Gardner had been seeing Mrs. Nara as a routine dental patient for about 20 years. She always came for her cleanings, x-rays, and occasionally, she required fillings or crowns. She was a reliable patient, and a pleasant person. Recently, she decided to invest in her smile and asked Dr. Gardner to coordinate a treatment plan for a pearly white set of veneers. She had been saving money for multiple years and was excited to improve the appearance of her smile with this elective procedure. The dental veneer procedure was going to be performed by Dr. Simon, who also worked in the office. The procedure would involve local anesthesia, removing a thin layer of enamel on the front teeth with a dental drill, and adhesively bonding

the veneers to the teeth. Dr. Simon had done additional training on dental veneers, so Dr. Gardner told Mrs. Nara that it would be best if she had the procedure done by Dr. Simon, even though he was not her regular dentist. She agreed.

“Have there been any changes to your health history?” Dr. Gardner asked Mrs. Nara.

“Nope! All the same.” Mrs. Nara stated.

“Any changes to medications? Any recent surgeries?” Dr. Gardner replied, realizing that many patients need some prompting to remember the changes that had happened since their last dental appointment.

“Nope. I’ve been pretty healthy actually!” she responded.

“Great. Let’s get started on taking those photos for Dr. Simon, which will help him plan the veneers for you. I’ll also check the health of your gums and the position of your bite.” Dr. Gardner said.

Dr. Gardner reached for the intraoral camera to begin taking the photos necessary for Dr. Simon to plan the treatment.

“Oh! I forgot to mention, I’ve actually started using marijuana recently. Do you think that will impact the treatment plan?” Mrs. Nara asked.

Dr. Gardner paused and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

THE CONVERSATION

“I don’t think it will impact the medications Dr. Simon plans to give you, but it might affect the way he positions the veneers or perhaps the shade he chooses to use. I’ll write it in the note so that he can decide on any adjustments that would be necessary.”

“No! I’m a federal employee. You can’t put that in my chart. I could get fired!” Mrs. Nara said.

Mrs. Nara was an employee of the Transportation Security Administration, otherwise known as TSA.

“Ummm...” Dr. Gardner paused. “I need to put it in the chart, since you told me. This could have implications for your treatment and we need to be thorough. Besides, your employer doesn’t have access to our charts anyway. They’re private.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. Can you just leave it out? Also, I go to church with Dr. Simon... I would sort of prefer if he didn’t know about it either. Do you think there’s something you could say that could help the treatment go smoothly, but without telling him that I’m using marijuana?”

Dr. Gardner was at a loss for words.

After a five second pause, he said “I’ll think about it. But we need to do what’s right.”

THE DILEMMA

After Mrs. Nara left the appointment, Dr. Gardner replayed the situation in his head. How could he possibly avoid telling his colleague, Dr. Simon, about Mrs. Nara’s marijuana use? Did Dr. Simon really need that information for treatment planning? What if Mrs. Nara became nervous and smoked marijuana before her appointment for the veneers? Would she be able to give true informed consent? Would there be any interactions between medications prescribed, anesthesia given, and the marijuana? Would Dr. Simon lose respect for Mrs. Nara or treat her differently in the clinic or at church if he knew that she was using marijuana? And why would Mrs. Nara think that her employer would have access to her dental charts anyway?