

## **SHOULD HE SAY SOMETHING?**

Karen R. McPherson

The Medical University of South Carolina

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*Dr. Robert Powell has recently finished dental school and a residency program in general dentistry. After a long search, Dr. Powell has landed himself a position as an associate dentist in a thriving practice. Dr. Powell is looking forward to eventually becoming a partner with this very successful local dentist. As Dr. Powell begins treating some of the long-time patients, he sees that his new mentor performs low-quality dental work. The patients adore their dentist, and would never leave the practice without a reason. Dr. Powell does not see anything that borders on malpractice, but the dental work is definitely not well done. With student loans to pay on and a great financial opportunity present, Dr. Powell wonders. Should he quietly leave the practice or should he say something?*

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### **Introduction**

Dr. Robert Powell doesn't know what he should do. He has his dream job as an associate dentist in a thriving dental practice. He knows in a few years he'll be invited to become a full partner. He's worked so hard for this moment, but now he's worried that this dream is turning into a nightmare. He just doesn't know if he can overlook what is going on in this practice. Should he ignore it or should he say something?

### **Dental School**

*It has been a long, expensive journey to get here, thought Robert. First, there were the four years of undergraduate study. Actually, those years weren't too bad. There were some challenging courses, but there were also plenty of opportunities for fun. In high school Robert was always at the top of his class, and his undergraduate studies proved the same. During his junior year he began the process of applying to dental school. That turned out to be a pretty stressful time. He had to take the dental entrance test twice before finally achieving the scores that he wanted. He needed to be as competitive as possible to ensure his place as a coveted applicant. Robert sent*

applications to over a dozen schools, followed by trips to several prominent universities for interviews. Every day he found himself checking the mailbox. After a wait that seemed like an eternity, the letter finally came. His top pick for dental school was about to render their verdict. As confident as he was in his qualifications, he still noticed that his fingers trembled as he opened the envelope. There, on paper, were the words that he desperately wanted to read. *Congratulations on your acceptance!* He did it! He earned a spot at one of the top schools in the Southeast. Robert could now consider himself one of the elite. Tuition was expensive, but he knew that following his dream to become a dentist would be worth the cost.

The four years of dental school passed in a blur. One class seemed barely over before the next one began. Robert worked harder than he had ever worked in his life. His classmates were some of the brightest students in the country, and he was determined to once again be at the very top of the class. There were many long nights spent studying and even more long hours spent working in the lab. He found himself working long after all of his classmates left for the night. They would say, "That's good enough. I should get a decent grade." Frankly, he never understood why they didn't want to take the extra time to make their work perfect. They joked that he was a perfectionist, but he liked to think of himself as meticulous. Even after he moved in to the clinical years of the training, there never seemed to be a break. In addition to treating patients there was now the stress of taking national and state board exams. None of these things were inexpensive either. At the time, he wasn't too concerned about the growing number of loans that he signed up for each semester. *I shouldn't have any trouble with the payments once I join a dental practice*, he thought.

After graduation, Robert decided to continue his studies by doing a residency program in general dentistry. He felt that another year of experience would increase his speed and help him keep up with the fast pace of a private practice. The residency also gave him an additional year to search for a practice to join. He knew that there would be no way to buy a practice of his own with his massive student loans. Enthusiastically, he began searching for a practice to join.

### **Transition to Private Practice**

Robert certainly knew how important it was to conduct an extensive search for the right practice. There were many things to consider. The location had to be in a city

where he wanted to live permanently. After all, dentistry isn't exactly a mobile job. It takes years to build relationships with the patients. Also, any practice that he considered must be busy enough to support an additional dentist. He needed a strong income right away in order to pay down his loans. Unfortunately, he burned through his savings account long ago. In addition to all of this, it was critical that Robert and the other dentist get along well. He was not going to even consider working every day with someone that he didn't like.

Robert planned his search very methodically. Most of his classmates were content to join any practice that made them an offer. He guessed that they simply viewed it as a stepping stone with a paycheck attached to it. Robert, on the other hand, wanted to find the perfect office for himself. He didn't want to have to repeat the process again in a few years. Like a marriage, he only wanted to do it once. He narrowed my search to a specific location, and made a thorough list describing exactly what he wanted the practice to offer.

For months Robert searched in vain until a friend introduced him to Dr. John Reed. They hit it off immediately. Dr. Reed had been in Robert's desired location for 16 years, and had built a very lucrative practice. He felt that his practice had become too busy for just one practitioner. As Robert eagerly took a tour of the office, he was very impressed. Everything about the office was just as he had envisioned it. He tried unsuccessfully to suppress the smile spreading across his face. They discussed their individual treatment philosophies and their goals for the practice. Dr. Reed appeared to share all of Robert's ideas and he could barely disguise his growing excitement. This practice seemed absolutely perfect for him! It had almost everything from his wish list.

Robert guessed that Dr. Reed must have liked him, because he soon made him an offer. He wanted to bring Robert in as an associate first. If all went well, in five years he would be offered an equal partnership in the practice. Robert found it almost impossible to contain his enthusiasm when they met over lunch to discuss the details. He couldn't believe that he had found this wonderful opportunity. Robert knew that Dr. Reed would be a great mentor for him. The patients and staff had all been with Dr. Reed since he opened his doors. Everyone in the community loved him, and his practice was one of the busiest in town. Robert felt that they had very similar personalities, and he just knew that this would become a wonderful partnership.

### **GETTING INTO THE SWING OF THINGS**

It took Robert a little while to get used to the fast pace of such a busy office. Since Dr. Reed allowed him to see established patients, his schedule was full from day one. It got a little hectic for him sometimes, but a busy schedule meant money in his pocket. Robert was keeping up with his loan payments and still had plenty of cash to spare. Robert and Dr. Reed got along very well, and he was always happy to answer any questions that Robert had for him. He helped him out if he was struggling with a difficult procedure, and offered to take his next patient if he got too far behind schedule. The staff was also great. They tried very hard to make him feel welcome. Robert sometimes got the feeling that the staff felt dismayed by his slow pace of treatment, but they tried to be supportive anyway. Robert was also learning about interacting with patients by watching Dr. Reed, who had such an easygoing way about him when he talked with the patients. Dr. Reed came across as confident but personable. He effortlessly fell into conversation with the patients, yet was capable of making each one feel like they were important to him. Robert marveled at how easily Dr. Reed could work quickly while carrying on conversations with the patients. Robert was trying to follow his lead, but he sometimes found it difficult. Robert had a tendency to focus on the work that he was performing and ended up unintentionally ignoring the patients. It was definitely a transition period, but he felt as though everything was going along smoothly.

After Robert had been at the practice for a few months, he started taking over most of the annual checkups. He was a little nervous at first because he had never performed an annual checkup before. Mostly, though, Robert was excited to take on this responsibility because this allowed him to meet more of the long time patients. It was also great for keeping his schedule full. He always seemed to find a filling or a crown that needed to be replaced. Robert felt as though he was beginning the best years of his life. Finally the hard work and sacrifice were paying off!

### **THE UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY**

One Tuesday morning, Robert found himself performing Mrs. Smith's checkup. Just as he found on most of the patients, there was a filling that he didn't think was done very well. He told Mrs. Smith that she needed to have the filling replaced. That's when he heard, "But didn't I just have that tooth filled?" Thankfully, his mask and glasses hid the shock on his face. Robert leaned in closer, squinting to

check the new x-rays once again. Sure enough, that poorly shaped filling could be seen in today's x-rays but not in the ones taken last year. He felt his heart beating faster as he looked through the old notes. Mrs. Smith was right! Dr. Reed placed that very filling six months ago!

The blood began to drain from Robert's face. He thought, *what should I say? What should I do?* He frantically tried to think of a good explanation to give to Mrs. Smith. He couldn't exactly take back what he just told her. Still, he was always told in school never to criticize another dentist's work. Robert tried to take a few deep breaths as thoughts raced through his mind. *This is my mentor. This is my friend. This is my boss! These patients love him. I can't say anything bad in front of them. What if they sue him? What if he sues me for slander?* Robert began to rationalize instead. *I wasn't there. I don't know what the situation was when that filling was placed. Maybe Mrs. Smith was difficult to work on.*

Thinking quickly, Robert told Mrs. Smith that there might have been a problem with the filling material. He said, "I think we had to send back a few shipments a while ago due to some problems that we have had." Robert smiled reassuringly and told her that he would replace her filling at no charge. Overcome with a growing sense of dread, he patted her on the shoulder and hurried out of the room.

Robert was becoming more and more concerned with every checkup that he performed. Repeatedly, he saw work that appeared rushed and sloppy. Robert had definitely learned his lesson, though. Before he said anything to the patients he always looked at their charts. Over and over he saw fillings and crowns that were not well done. Most of them looked like a big blob of material rather than a tooth. They were functional but certainly not ideal. Looking back through the charts, Robert realized that most of his days were filled with replacements of fillings or crowns that Dr. Reed had placed.

Unfortunately, now Robert was no longer excited about his busy schedule. He wondered if he was only busy because Dr. Reed was too busy to do his work right the first time. Robert considered whether he should just ignore all of these poor quality restorations. If they weren't broken or decayed, did he really need to replace them?

None of Dr. Reed's work bordered on malpractice, but it was certainly of a lower quality than Robert would want his patients to receive. He was reminded of his classmates who used to leave the lab early saying, "that's good enough." Is this what they were like in their practice? How was it possible that Dr. Reed appeared to care so much about his patients but didn't seem to care about the quality of his work? Robert really didn't know what to do. When he joined this practice everything seemed perfect. The money had been great from the beginning, and he still had these huge student loan payments to make each month. Robert also really liked the Dr. Reed, the staff, and the patients.

*I don't want to leave, but I don't think that I can overlook the low-quality work that Dr. Reed provides. Should I try to talk to Dr. Reed about it? Should I tell the patients to replace restorations that Dr. Reed just placed? Should I tell everyone that this man that they have esteemed for years, isn't really a great dentist? What if his work gets even worse? Should I quietly leave the practice or should I say something?*