

A STICKY SITUATION

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Delicate Dental was a large group dental practice of four full-time dentists, a robust front office and financial team, and several dental assistants and hygienists. One of the more senior dentists, Dr. Wiseman, treated mainly geriatric patients who needed complete dentures. Dr. Wiseman had practiced dentistry, specifically Prosthodontics, for many years and had a very good reputation in the dental community and among his patients. In recent months, however, several of Dr. Wiseman's patients had called the office manager to report that they were unhappy with their dentures and needed a doctor to address their concerns. They insisted that they do not want to see Dr. Wiseman, nor do they want him to know about their dissatisfaction, lest his feelings be hurt. Many of these patients needed a new set of dentures, yet cannot afford the cost, especially since they had already exhausted their insurance coverage on the set from Dr. Wiseman. They had also expressed that it was dental office's obligation to absorb the cost of a new set of dentures made by one of the other dentists. This case highlights a complicated, but not uncommon, situation encountered in even the most reputable dental offices.

The office manager encouraged the patients to reschedule with Dr. Wiseman, assuring them that he would recognize their concerns and address them appropriately. Nevertheless, not a single one of these patients would agree to see Dr. Wiseman again. The office manager had also offered the displeased patients a refund for the cost of the dentures and facilitated transfer of their records to another dental office of their choice, but the patients had many reasons for wanting to continue their care at Delicate Dental. They liked that they know all the staff in the office, they knew the same dental assistant for years, and many of them lived within walking distance in a retirement community down the street. When the other dentists followed up with Dr. Wiseman's patients, they discovered that the problems were so extensive that new dentures were the only solution. Upon relaying the cost of this retreatment, every patient refused to pay and insisted that they had already paid for the work and that the office should absorb the cost of a new set. The office manager and Dr. Wiseman's colleagues must decide how to approach these recurrent problems among Dr. Wiseman's patients.

TODAY

“Ms. Sandburg, we’re ready for you,” longtime, devoted dental assistant Shelly summoned an equally allegiant individual, a well-liked and loyal patient, Gloria Sandburg, from the traditional, but impeccably spotless waiting room of Delicate Dental.

“How are things going for you, Ms. Sandburg?”

“Oh, things are okay, honey. But, Shelly, where are we going? Are you trying to get me some exercise walking in circles around this place?”

“Ha, oh no, I’m sorry Ms. Sandburg. Dr. Medley is going to use a different room today. Follow me, it’s right down this hall.”

GLORIA SANDBURG

Just a couple months ago, Ms. Sandburg received her new set of dentures from Dr. Wiseman, whose operatory was right down the hall in Delicate Dental. Ms. Sandburg had been wearing upper and lower dentures for nearly thirty years, so she had been through more than a few sets in her time. She was always happy about the look and the fit of her most recent set of dentures, however the teeth had worn down so much that she was having trouble chewing. A true veteran of denture-related ordeals, Ms. Sandburg simply knew it was time to go see Dr. Wiseman for a new set. He had made her last couple sets of dentures and the process had been smooth sailing, so she didn’t expect anything different this time around.

Unfortunately, the last couple months of dental appointments had been quite a turbulent ride for Ms. Sandburg, and in the end, she was left with a set of dentures that were too loose and didn’t look right. Ms. Sandburg knew she didn’t care for her new set of dentures the day that she got them. She asked Dr. Wiseman why he put the teeth in such strange alignment when she had asked for an exact replica of her old set. He told her that it was “just your imagination” and that after a few weeks she would be used to them and wouldn’t notice any difference.

Wanting to comply, Ms. Sandburg tried wearing her new dentures for a few weeks, as advised by Dr. Wiseman. Her husband told her she looked like a beaver with her new upper dentures, and she was getting frustrated that she had to use denture adhesive to keep the top denture in her mouth. She wasn’t sure how it could be so much looser than her previous set of dentures, which were over ten years old.

Finally, after a few weeks, Ms. Sandburg resolved to wear her old set of dentures again since they appealed to her much more than this new set. Still, she had paid

for the new set and couldn't chew with the worn-out teeth of her old denture, so she arranged a meeting with Libby, the office manager of Delicate Dental, to figure out what to do next.

DELICATE DENTAL

Delicate Dental had been a bustling dental office for over fifty years, located just outside of Quincy, Pennsylvania. It was undeniably a local establishment with an unbeatable reputation. Having originated in one half of an enormous ranch-style house in the middle of town, the practice grew with more patients and more doctors and plenty of unused space in the old home accommodated the expansion with no problems. The original owner doctor had passed away long ago and his family had no desire to stay involved with ownership or management of the practice.

The four current dentists of Delicate Dental were all equal partners in ownership; each worked with his or her own assistants and had his own batch of patients, some new, some old. They all got along well and worked well together, and they enjoyed the benefits of sharing a great building, a skilled financial team, and a reliable staff of hygienists and dental assistants. Perhaps more than anything else, the dentists of Delicate Dental appreciated the value of working at a dental office with the rapport of a time-tested, integral part of the community.

THE MEETING WITH THE OFFICE MANAGER

A few weeks after receiving her new set of dentures from Dr. Wiseman, Ms. Sandburg had a meeting with Libby, the office manager of Delicate Dental of fourteen years. Ms. Sandburg explained to Libby that she had never been so disappointed with a new set of dentures as she was now. She had worn nearly five sets of dentures since she was a young lady, so she was quite experienced and she knew it wasn't difficult to meet her expectations. She was concerned however, that Dr. Wiseman had indeed succeeded to make her a few sets of wonderful denture in the past, yet with this set he had failed miserably. Even worse than that, Dr. Wiseman didn't seem to care that she was displeased with her dentures and always suggested that it was her fault that she didn't like her dentures. Every time she saw Dr. Wiseman since they began working on this set, she left his operatory feeling either scared or guilty.

After her very first denture-making appointment a few months ago, Dr. Wiseman's assistant had called her to come back to the office to re-make a set of impressions. It sounded as if Dr. Wiseman had misplaced them or perhaps thrown them in the garbage. Ms. Sandburg changed around a few doctor appointments and social obligations and came to see Dr. Wiseman during a brief opening in his schedule one day.

During this appointment, and the others that followed, Ms. Sandburg noted the persistent nagging by Dr. Wiseman's assistant that he should "hurry up because your next patient is waiting." He always was a storyteller, but his stories these days seemed to make little sense and he did far more senseless storytelling than dentistry during the appointment. Whenever Ms. Sandburg tried to express interest in one of his "stories" he got irritated with the interruption and, if she asked a question, he got frustrated that she didn't understand. After a while, Ms. Sandburg decided it might be best to stick with listening only.

At one of the final appointments before the denture was completed, Ms. Sandburg checked in with the receptionist, followed Dr. Wiseman's assistant back to his operatory, only to find out that Dr. Wiseman had forgotten to complete some lab work for the appointment and had failed to delay her appointment accordingly. Back home Ms. Sandburg went, until the office called her two weeks later when Dr. Wiseman had finished his lab work.

"Ms. Sandburg, I am so sorry for the ongoing nuisance you have endured trying to get a new denture. I really didn't know the extent of the problems you've experienced, and unfortunately you are not our only patient who has expressed these types of concerns."

"Thanks, Libby. I know you are doing your best. I also know I'm an old lady, and sometimes old ladies get hard to deal with, but I can assure you that all I'm hoping for is a new denture that looks just like the last several I've had. They're always just the same, no problem. Even the last couple that Dr. Wiseman has made for me."

"I completely understand, Ms. Sandburg. Can I convince you to have one more follow-up appointment with Dr. Wiseman? He is such a nice man and a talented dentist, and I'm certain he wants you to be happy. Perhaps you could show him once more your specific concerns about this denture and he would address them accordingly? He's been a little stressed lately, so maybe an early morning appointment next week, with plenty of time for you two to talk?"

"Libby, I just can't talk to Dr. Wiseman about this denture any more. I've already had two appointments in which he told me that I "just need to get used to it," and I don't want to make him angry again. We see his family at church every week and I'd hate to create a rift just because of some silly denture problems. He is such a sensitive man, and gets so flustered when there's a problem, I'd hate for him to know how upset I am with this set. At the end of the day, I just don't think he understands or wants to listen to my concerns, and so I just don't think he's the one to fix this problem."

“Ok, Ms. Sandburg, I do understand. I would like to propose that we refund the total cost of your dentures and I could transfer your records to another dental office of your choice, and you could have a new denture made by another dentist? How does that sound? “

“No, Libby, that’s not going to work. I have already used my insurance allowance on this set and I simply cannot afford to pay the full cost of another set. I don’t even think my PPO will subsidize dental treatment at any other dental office in town. I’d have to go almost an hour away. Did you know I’m not driving any more these days? I’ve just been walking here. There are too many reasons I cannot go elsewhere, Libby. I just need to see one of your other dentists.”

“Ok, yes that makes sense. Well let me look at Dr. Medley’s schedule for next week. She does excellent work and we can see what she says about everything.”

BACK TO TODAY

“Hi Ms. Sandburg, how are you!?”

“Hi, Dr. Medley, I’m doing well, honey. Shelly took me on a tour of this place as if I’d never it seen it before, so I just need to catch my breath.”

“Ha, sure Ms. Sandburg. Shelly wasn’t exactly trying to show you the scenic route, but I think we are trying to make sure that you don’t run into Dr. Wiseman today—the less explaining we have to do, the better. I’m sure you’ll agree.”

“That is right, Dr. Medley. I would just hate for him to know how upset I am about these dentures. I know it’s not his fault, but he seems to not understand my concerns and I’m not sure any more talking to him will make a difference. You know how men are. Anyway, I was hoping you could have a look and we could get this all fixed.”

“No problem. Let me just look at your old dentures in your mouth so I can compare them to your new dentures. Libby told me that you don’t care for how these top front teeth are sticking out so much with your new denture.”

“Yes, that’s a problem, both for me and for husband. He says it looks like I have a fat lip whenever I wear them. They also won’t even stay in my mouth without a generous layer of that gross sticky denture glue; I’ve never had to use any of that stuff in my thirty years of dentures!”

Dr. Medley spent a few minutes evaluating Ms. Sandburg's smile, her profile, and her bite with her new dentures and her old dentures. Although Ms. Sandburg had requested an "exact copy" of her old dentures, Dr. Medley hardly noted any similarities between the old denture and her new set.

"Ms. Sandburg, it looks to me like there's just no way we can make these dentures work. We could reline the interior of this new set so that it has a better fit in your mouth, but that won't change the unusual position of these front teeth. Without making a new denture, I just don't think you're going to be very happy."

"Well that's what I expected to hear. I'm not surprised; they're just so far off. I was hoping that you could make me a new set to replace these, Dr. Medley. After all, my friends have been happy with your work and you know I'd hate for Dr. Wiseman to know just how disappointed I am."

"I would be happy to make you a new set of dentures, Ms. Sandburg, and I think I understand pretty well what you are hoping for in a new denture. Before we get started, though, you will need to speak with Libby about the treatment plan and the financial side of things. I understand that your dental insurance has already been applied to the set that Dr. Wiseman made for you, so they will not contribute to another set for at least five years from now."

"Ok, I will go talk with Libby and let her know we're going to move forward with a new set. Surely you can just make me a new set at no charge, since you all are like family here and Dr. Wiseman didn't mean any harm. We can just forget this ever happened, right...?"