

SPECIAL FEATURE

How to play a dentist

By Sharif Islam, Semi-retired Associate, London, UK

One becomes accustomed in this profession to fielding the occasional bizarre question from offbeat patients. Should I dip my interdental brushes in coconut oil before using them? If cola can clean engines won't it remove the stains from my teeth if I hold it in my mouth long enough? If sugar causes tooth decay then does salt enable tooth repair?

In fact, it was a rather sincere question from a casting director that disrupted my usually self-assured demeanour. How does one go about playing a dentist? She wasn't researching a role or character. She was genuinely asking how one should behave to be convincing in this job.

Auditioning was never an alien process. From school plays to voiceovers to meeting a new patient, it's all an audition of sorts. But the idea that being a dentist was merely inhabiting a role and, by implication, wearing a veneer of disingenuity, was somewhat troubling to me. Most dentists are committed professionals who care deeply about their patients and are passionate about their work. It's not a façade they drape over themselves like a set of scrubs. Dentistry is something they are, not just something they do.

For some, of course, it may well be just a job, a space-filler or stepping stone *en route* to their true calling. They may have experienced that old cliché that when declaring that they wanted to be an actor, their parents graciously informed them it was pronounced 'doctor'. Indeed, my own creative outlets produced alternative sources of income but the chips fell favourably for me. Even my sporadic dabble in dentistry is still a fulfilling flirtation with the many hats that enrich the experience, be it artist, engineer, counsellor or clinician. When I shuffle off this mortal coil I shall not pause for regret.

But it was still an intriguing question, despite what some may claim, that none of us was born a dentist so there is arguably some role-playing involved each time we go to work. How we present ourselves as a credible and skilled professional in our field must surely require some creative performance: everything from the confidence we exude to the language we use must 'sell' the idea of us as a dentist to the patient. Why should they believe that we know what we are talking about if we cannot construct a coherent explanation with the appropriate eloquence?

Indeed, the few occasions that we possibly don't really know what we are talking about are belied by a sincere tone and skilful articulation. Isn't that a performance? If the patient buys it then it's probably worthy of an Oscar.

My colleagues inform me that when I speak to patients on the phone my voice and tone are noticeably different. The impeccable political incorrectness and habitual profanity are replaced by impeccable syntax and received pronunciation. The patient is hearing their dentist in their ear, the apparently caring and empathic character that they are familiar with from the surgery.

What else goes into this performance to convince others of our professional identity? Police officers have told me that wearing



the uniform makes them feel powerful and true, albeit for noble intentions. Nurses make references to their outfits that could fill a comedic repertoire. Batman says he's only the Dark Knight once he's squeezed into his cowl and cape. Well, I'm sure a plumber needs more than a plunger in their hand to promote their wares but for dentists the scrubs and loupes are an effective cosplaying wardrobe choice. I'm not saying that I feel like less of a dentist without the blood and saliva dripping from my tunic but it's an undeniably important part of the image.

Of course, one could reframe one's answer with a more idealistic premise: that playing the role of a dentist necessitates genuine compassion and consummate communication, as well as a highly specific skillset that cannot be feigned. In order to be a dentist, one has to have surmounted a multitude of academic and practical hurdles to achieve their qualification, such that the hands reaching into that casting director's mouth are endowed with tremendous dexterity and backed by an actual knowledge of dentistry.

So, as detached as I may be, the more I think about it, being a dentist is less a role to play than a profession to embrace with the primary goal of making patients healthier. Professionals and clients inevitably pretend a little when dealing with each other, whether they choose to admit it or not. But perhaps we can leave the acting to those who need to do just that for their living, while we invest our energy in healing dental disease.

And that's pretty much how I answered the question. And, I believe, how I passed my audition. ■