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An exclusive interview with Tom Risbrudt, DDS, a visiting faculty member of The Pankey Institute - Part II



In this insightful, exclusive interview, Tom Risbrudt talks about his journey to become a top-level dentist; who influenced him, his ups and downs in dentistry, why he loves dentistry, his advice to dentists making the switch from managed care to private care, where he sees relationship-based dentistry in the future, what he enjoys the most and least about practicing dentistry and what he would change if he could start again.

Tom Risbrudt, DDS was born and raised in North Dakota. He graduated from the University of Minnesota dental school in 1964. He has practiced dentistry in San Clemente, California since 1966. He participated in one of the first capitation programs as an associate in the 60's. He has had a "18-wheeler" practice hurtling out of control down the road with 50-75 new patients a month and a huge staff" to a small, caring, top-level private care dental practice. Tom is a visiting faculty member at The Pankey Institute.

This interview was done in December of 2003

ISOC: What things have worked best for you in building/rebuilding your practice?

Tom: Hiring extraordinary people, for one. I spent many years trying to "fix" people. The basics for an extraordinary hire: An attitude of servitude; a sense of humor; a desire to develop relationships; a desire to be productive; a sense of Gestalt, or seeing the big picture of how everything works together; and an empathetic spirit.

If most of these attributes are in place, I can live with some of the other little shortcomings without losing my joy. If these basics aren't there, it will be an uphill fight in a quality, relationship-based, fee-for-service practice to reach your goals. Underlying all this must be a sense of mutual respect. I cherish my team members--I can't do it without them! **I started using a newsletter more than 25 years ago.** It has been a terrific marketing tool for our practice. I enjoy writing the entire thing myself. It helps me focus and refine the philosophy of this practice, since I am going to send it out to our client base in written form. When it gets mailed, the phone rings for a week afterwards with either compliments or questions, referrals, or commitments to action.

The operative word here is that I fully enjoy writing it, so it may not be for everyone. If you can't write it yourself, and don't enjoy it, don't use some canned service that is "just not you." In the same vein, **I use a lot of personal hand-written notes to connect with people.** For example, I write a personal note to welcome the new patient after our first appointment together. I write a thank you to the referral source.

If one of our patients gets written up in the local paper for some accomplishment or recognition, we clip the article and send it along with a personal note of congratulations from me. We also send birthday cards, which I personally sign with a little one-liner of congratulations, etc. In short, we like to stay connected!

ISOC: Why did you choose dentistry as a career?

Tom: I had a lot of dentistry done as an adolescent. My dentist was a very conscientious guy, a skillful practitioner, and I had a lot of trust in him. **He took me out to lunch one day and encouraged me to give dentistry some thought. I remember how much I appreciated his interest.**

“ What do you like most about practicing dentistry?
Tom: Helping people make informed decisions that are in their best interests for their dental future, and then implementing a comprehensive plan unique to their circumstances, temperament and objectives to accomplish this. The resulting relationships are priceless! ”

My Dad's brother was a dentist, and he also encouraged me. My folks ran with the local MD's socially, so I knew and respected most of the local physicians. Medicine had a real attraction for me—a chance to help people, and make a good living. But, whenever my folks would entertain, not a single one of those physicians could make it through the evening without going out on call for some kind of emergency or another.

I decided I wanted some kind of home life, so dentistry seemed like an environment where one could control their time, and still help people. I must admit, the income and lifestyle was a “biggy” for me at the time. It wasn't until I had some serious mentoring that I made a significant philosophical change in this particular orientation to my life and practice.

ISOC: What do you like most about practicing dentistry?

Tom: Helping people make informed decisions that are in their best interests for their dental future, and then implementing a comprehensive plan unique to their circumstances, temperament and objectives to accomplish this. The resulting relationships are priceless!

Like least? Having to find another practice for people that just “don't get it.” It feels like a colossal failure to communicate on my part, but I have learned that I can't please everyone.

ISOC: What kinds of things do you enjoy doing outside of your professional life?

Tom: My hobby is collecting and running electric trains—I belong to a club that is housed in the Model Railroading Museum in Balboa Park in San Diego—a premiere venue for the hobby. I still enjoy hunting upland game, especially with our son. I'm loving being “PaPa” to our three little grandkids. **Although professionally related, I get a lot of joy out of teaching at the Pankey Institute and mentoring younger dentists—an incredible honor!!**

ISOC: What has surprised you about practicing dentistry?

Tom: The kind of dentistry I'm doing now is far beyond what I envisioned when I started, and the spiritual rewards are beyond my wildest dreams. Evolving from a high volume practice into a low-volume, occlusally-based comprehensive restorative practice. **Starting out looking at dentistry as a way to make a lot of money, and then finding out that the way to make money is first help people with integrity, and the rest takes care of itself.**

ISOC: What professional accomplishments are you most pleased with?

Tom: Being a teaching associate at the Pankey Institute is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Fellowship in the Academy of General Dentistry. My continuing involvement in meaningful study clubs, especially in developing and organizing meaningful speakers and programs.

ISOC: What personal qualities improved the most over the years?

Tom: Confidence and enthusiasm for what I can do, professionally, thanks to Dr. Pankey and the Pankey Institute. **Interpersonal communication skills, knowing myself better, and refinement of the spiritual aspects of health-centered dentistry, thanks to Dr. Chuck Sorenson.**

Least? Frustration tolerance, especially for lab foul-ups.

ISOC: Looking back, what major value, principle or philosophy is the most important to a dentist?

Tom: Pankey's Cross of Dentistry: Know Yourself! Know your patient! Know your work! Apply your knowledge! All require integrity, an essential part of one's character--morally, spiritually, and professionally.

Is this different than what you thought early in your career? It sure is! Thank God for mentors, who helped me to see things in a different light!

ISOC: If you could live your professional life over again, what would you change?

Tom: I'd move more intentionally toward my vision of a preferred future for myself. It's about being congruent with your core values. It's about faith. That's why I'm considering another new office after forty years in practice.

I first met L.D. Pankey in 1975. **After describing what I thought was my pretty hot practice with 50-75 new patients/ month to him, he looked me straight in the eye and said: "Sooner or later, Tom, you'll have to decide whether you want to have superficial relationships with a lot of people, or life-changing relationships with a few."** He sensed immediately that a volume practice was not congruent with who I was. It took me nearly twenty years, but I finally "got it."

Time is precious—get with it!

ISOC: What are the most important books/authors you have read in your professional life?

Tom: The Bible—practice management for life. A Philosophy of the Practice of Dentistry, by L.D. Pankey; The Dental Physician by Aelred Fonder; Successful Preventive Dental Practices, by Robert Barkley; Evaluation, Diagnosis and Treatment of Occlusal Problems, by Peter Dawson.

ISOC: What important wisdom/thoughts would you impart to dentists?

Tom: Get a mentor(s)! Someone you admire, and don't be shy about asking for help. When I am asked, it is life's biggest compliment!

Don't be afraid to get some professional help from a trained clinical psychologist in the areas of mission and

philosophy development, conflict resolution, and team management.

Learn to live on less than you make, and the sooner the better! **Examine yourself: Am I chasing after more dollars to buy "stuff" to put a band-aid over my unhappiness with my practice and my life?**

It is essential to learn timeless concepts, because no two cases are alike. Once you master occlusal concepts, you can creatively solve complex problems, which makes dentistry fun. **We're talking about doing dentistry that will change a patient's life!**

Early in your career: Don't listen too much to your peers brag about their gross. Hang out with more mature practitioners who can be real with you.

Mid-career? Move continuously towards excellence—challenge yourself and your professional abilities. Listen to the masters.

Late career? Be available to mentor others. Give it back--generously! (Many gave to you!)

ISOC: What was easiest for you in practicing dentistry?

Tom: The people part. My Dad was a great role model. The problem was, I soon could convince people to do dentistry that almost killed me to deliver because I didn't "have it on the shelf" technically.

Hardest? The technical part, especially mastering occlusal concepts and then translating them into workable treatment plans. Nothing in this world that is worthwhile comes easy. This is one of the most rewarding parts of practice to me now.

ISOC: Where do you see health-centered dentistry in ten years?

Tom: That's anybody's guess, but there is more and more of a movement towards wellness in healthcare, philosophically, and dentistry in my mind has always had that mind-set.

What other profession tries to work itself out of a job with preventive concepts like dentistry has? Who ever thought we'd see the wave of cosmetic/esthetic demands for patients' self-esteem?

We provide quality nutritional supplements through the practice. I'm about halfway through the coursework for a degree in naturopathy. You'd be surprised how your clients respect your opinion for enhancing their lifestyle, ethically. I see more and more of this kind of thing to enhance surgical results, maintain health and wellness, etc.

ISOC: Any other thoughts or comments?

Tom: If you are in a study club where you and your colleagues can be real with one another, count yourself blessed. If you are not in a study club environment like that, find one! Quick!!

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