

The next generation looks at health-centered dentistry.

An Interview with Paul A. Henny, DDS



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These interviews will be published periodically and archived to create a written history of how this way of practicing was created. Included will be the people and works that influenced the pioneers.

Paul Henny's journey is significant because he is a leader in the next generation of dentists who have created health-centered practices. Paul's generation will carry on and improve the work of the pioneers of health-centered dentistry.

Paul Henny was born on June 4, 1958 and grew up in Portage, Michigan. He received a BS from the University of Kentucky and his DDS from the University of Michigan. ISOC interviewed Paul on February 23, 2003.

Paul was interviewed by Lynn Carlisle of www.spiritofcaring.com on February 23, 2003. Spiritofcaring.com is an internet resource for dentists interested in developing a patient-centered, collaborative relationship oriented practice. He maintains a Restorative & Esthetic dental practice in Roanoke, Virginia and is President of the Bob Barkley Study Club www.bobbarkley.com. He can be reached via e-mail at paulhennydds@aol.com

ISOC: Looking back, what were the most significant events as a child that influenced your career as a dentist?

Paul: My orthodontist growing up seemed to really love his work. He was always positive and upbeat and seemed intellectually challenged by the work. My father was an Oral Surgeon and I never really got that sense of satisfaction with work from him. My father's brother was a very prominent internationally recognized Oral Surgeon as well, so I very much grew up in a "dental culture". Finding my own preferred flavor was the challenge for me.

ISOC: Who have had the most important influences on you as a dentist?

Paul:

1. Walter Doyle, an Orthodontist in Lexington Kentucky who had an unbelievable “outside the box” occlusally based practice. He was a great mentor to me and was one of the first people to support my vision of transitioning my practice to a more health centered, comprehensive care model.
2. Pete Dawson, who opened my eyes to much of what I needed to learn about and master to become who I wanted to become.
3. Avrom King, who heavily influenced my thinking early on.
4. Bob Barkley, although I never met or saw Bob speak, I feel he is a part of my life almost every day.
5. L.D. Pankey, a true visionary to dentistry and the Institute founded in his honor.
6. Frank Spear, a masterful clinician and teacher.
7. Bob Winter, the clinician’s clinician and a genuine and humble person.
8. Carl Rogers for helping me see that being an effective dentist could be so much more if I could master some of his teachings.
9. Scott Peck – Life is difficult, so get over it and get on with it
10. Bob Sweazy, who picked me up when I was down, dusted me off and told me to get back in the game of life.

ISOC: What has been your most difficult time as a dentist?

Paul: When I realized, after about three years of practice, that I did not like being a dentist and that if I didn’t find a way to practice that was more congruent with who I was inside, I was going to have to start all over and find something else to do with my life.

ISOC: What was the happiest time for you as a dentist?

Paul: When I started to see that many of the Avrom King / Barkley/ Pankey concepts that I had initially bought into via sheer faith start to positively influence my practice direction.

ISOC: If you had a chance to change anything as a dentist, what would it be?

Paul: Not much. I hated the first few years, but without those seeds of discontent I never would have been motivated to pay the price to master many of the things that I do almost effortlessly on a daily basis today.

ISOC: How did you and your spouse meet?

Paul: She actually was a patient of mine who came to me because her mother was my hygienist and had this feeling that if she could just get us to meet one another we would click. She was right. You know what they say about a woman’s intuition. . .

ISOC: Please recall one of the best parts of your marriage.

Paul: Our deep friendship and common vision of our future together.

ISOC: What are the most significant things you have learned from your marriage?

Paul: Balance between one's personal and professional life is a struggle but is essential. A great marriage is a tremendous foundation for personal and professional growth.

ISOC: How many children do you have?

Paul: A two year old and another one on the way.

ISOC: What is it like to be a parent?

Paul: Amazed most of the time. I marvel at their pure joy and passion for life.

ISOC: Where have you worked/practiced as a dentist?

Paul: Lexington, Kentucky, Whidbey Island Washington (USNR) , Charleston, South Carolina (USNR), South Boston, Virginia, Roanoke, Virginia.

ISOC: Why did you move or change positions?

Paul: As I stated earlier, I was generally unhappy as a dentist when I first started in Lexington. At that point, I decided a good solution to my woes would be to join the Navy, "see the world", and decide if I wanted to spend the rest of my life being a dentist. After three mostly fun years, the answer was "yes" but not in the military.

So I moved to South Boston, Virginia - a small Southside town of about six thousand and associated with a man who had done some training at the Pankey Institute. He was in the autumn of his career. I had heard of the Pankey Institute and thought it might be a good buy-out opportunity. As is often the case, the practice was much less than I had been led to believe, so after a year and a half I left for Roanoke to purchase a retiring dentist's practice with the specific intention of transitioning it to a comprehensive care practice model. The rest is history.

ISOC: Why did you choose dentistry as a career?

Paul: I pretty much grew up around it. In my case, this was almost a negative as I do not think I really had thought enough about doing other things as well. Consequently I ended up committing myself to be a dentist *after* I became one which seems a bit backwards to me...

ISOC: What do you like most about practicing dentistry?

Paul: The depth of the interpersonal contact. The sincere gratitude that my patients express frequently in the patient-centered environment we have been able to create.

ISOC: Least?

Paul: Accounting, left-brain business stuff, especially when I am tired.

ISOC: What goal in life did you have as a child or teenager?

Paul: To become an Orthodontist

ISOC: What did you enjoy the most as a young person?

Paul: Custom building bicycles and taking long trips on them.

ISOC: Did you have a favorite subject as a youngster in school? What was it?

Paul: Writing, English literature, Psychology and Sociology.

ISOC: Where did you attend college? What was your favorite subject?

Paul: I received my B.S. from the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Although I majored in Biology, Botany fascinated me and I almost switched my major and pursuit of dentistry.

ISOC: Where did you attend dental school? Your favorite subject? What was your dental school experience like?

Paul: I attended the University Of Michigan School Of Dentistry. For the most part, I did not enjoy my dental school experience. I did however connect with a few instructors who seemed to care about me and to no surprise, I thrived under their mentorship. More specifically, my favorite area became prosthodontics as I really enjoyed working with these types of patients.

ISOC: Were you happy in college?

Paul: Yes, I had I great time at Kentucky and really grew a lot socially and intellectually during that period.

ISOC: In dental school?

Paul: Not really. I spent a lot of time wondering if I had made a big mistake following my father, uncle and brother into the profession.

ISOC: What important values did your family impart to you?

Paul: Integrity. Pride for the profession of dentistry, determination, focus, the need for personal development and independence.

ISOC: Dental school?

Paul: Respect for the profession in addition to the essential need for professionalism.

ISOC: How would you describe your dental school experience?

Paul: As I stated earlier, not too great. I say this as well because I had the privilege to teach at both the University of Kentucky and Washington dental schools which both had developed a much more humane way to develop young adults into dental professionals.

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

Paul: Spending time with Susan and Julianne, writing, traveling, lecturing, teaching, and occasionally cooking.

ISOC: Have you attained your major goals in life? Paul: Not yet.

ISOC: What has surprised you about practicing dentistry?

Paul: That it can be so humanistic and nurturing for all parties.

ISOC: What professional accomplishments are you most pleased with?

Paul: Appointment to the visiting faculty of the Pankey Institute, being asked to speak at prominent national meetings, being considered by some as a thought leader in dentistry.

ISOC: What of your personal qualities have improved the most over the years?

Paul: My communication skills with my patients - and because fine dentistry is a collaborative effort - the type and quality of the dentistry I have been able to provide for my patients.

ISOC: Least?

Paul: I'm still too computer illiterate and my ignorance is starting to get quite expensive.

ISOC: Have you changed over your lifetime?

Paul: Absolutely.

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

Paul: Authenticity.

ISOC: Is this different than what you thought early in your career?

Paul: Yes, I would have said something clinically oriented – without authenticity other skills are greatly diminished.

ISOC: What has been your biggest lesson learned?

Paul: Most people want the best for themselves - they may not yet know what that means or how they can get it. I now see my primary role is to help people make the best choices for themselves.

ISOC: What was the main turning point in your life?

Paul: When I met Walter Doyle and realized that the practice of dentistry could be so stimulating and very different than I had ever imagined. When I first met him at age 58 he was like a kid in a candy shop with a passion for dentistry like none I had ever seen before.

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

Paul: Not too much. It hasn't been easy but it is through the struggle that one grows in wisdom and strength.

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

Paul: Carl Rogers, LD Pankey, Bob Barkley, Lynn Carlisle, Avrom King, Pete Dawson.

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

Early in their career?

Paul: Get your head out of the sand and see how people you admire practice. If you don't have someone that you admire, seek one out through the Pankey Institute, Bob Barkley Study Club, or other values - based organization.

Mid-career?

Paul: Get moving. If you have a dream - make hay. Time is precious.

Late career?

Paul: Savor the value of your life's work. Find congruent ways to share what you have learned with others which will make their journey easier.

ISOC: What do you think will be your greatest legacy?

Paul: Hopefully teaching and facilitating positive change in others.

ISOC: What is easiest for you in the practice of dentistry?

Paul: Now - helping patients learn what they want for themselves and helping them to achieve / attain it.

ISOC: Hardest?

Paul: Seeing too many people in a day. I just can't (and won't) practice like that any more. It is a loose – loose arrangement. The patients never get your full attention and thus full and proper care. As a result, the patients feel rushed and cheated and the dentist rarely feels gratitude from his /her patients. This perpetual cycle has a strongly negative impact on the psyche of dentists over time and is likely one of the reasons the suicide rate of dentists is so high.

ISOC: Looking out ten years, what do you think dentistry will be like?

Paul: For most... de-professionalized, more corporatized, more feminine, more governmentally controlled... in other words, a squeezed and unhappy group of people. But for the few... the best of all professions and for the patients under their care, the best that dentistry has to offer.

ISOC: Challenges?

Paul: Meeting the growing demand for basic care, particularly in underserved areas.

ISOC: Practice models?

Paul: Most will be high volume large group practices. The small nimble patient-centered practice will continue to gain strength and interest.

ISOC: What will no longer be important?

Paul: I don't know.

ISOC: What new things will be required?

Paul: Higher and higher levels of measurable competency. I think that basic competency exams are on the horizon.

ISOC: What can you tell dentists about: L.D. Pankey, Harold Wirth, and Bob Barkley?

Paul: Only that I never had a chance to meet any of them, yet they live on through their work which has had a huge impact on my life. They help me see the world through better eyes.

ISOC: What is their most important legacy?

Paul: To help dentists see patients as people with the same motivations and priorities as anyone else and to help them to sort things out and get what they want out of dentistry.

ISOC: What circumstances / people led to the creation of your health-centered / relationship-based practice of dentistry?

Paul: Recognition that conventional approaches to care (although cloaked in titles such as “preventive dentistry”) were generally failing and ineffective. Thought leaders like Pankey and Barkley began to ask “why” and dared to step outside the box and experiment with methods which ultimately proved to be much more effective with regard to connecting with patients and moving them toward optimal health.

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

Paul: Gaining momentum but still being a minority player in the whole market.

ISOC: What kinds of things did you enjoy doing as a child?

Paul: Bicycling, cross country skiing, distance running, music

ISOC: Did you like to read? Favorite books and authors?

Paul: Almost any Steinbeck & Hemmingway

ISOC: What person had the most influence on you as a child?

Paul: I would have to say my mother who holds a masters degree in education. She had a laser sharp idea of how she wanted her children to grow and develop. Particularly with regard to each of us learning to be independent thinkers, morally grounded, and financially independent as well.

ISOC: What was the most traumatic time in your life as a child or teenager?

Paul: The death of my very best friend in a car accident shortly after high school graduation.

ISOC: What was the happiest time in your life as a child or teenager?

Paul: Winning some rather hard earned long distance races locally and regionally during high school. These were some of my first experiences with the need for self discipline, delayed gratification, and how glorious the wins can be if you stay focused and stick with something that you really want to happen.

ISOC: Please tell me about a human relations incident in your dental career. How you felt about it at the time; how you feel about it now; what you would do differently.

Paul: When I first started trying to implement comprehensive exams into my practice routine, the reaction of many patients was very negative. I was devastated, as I viewed it as essential to the diagnostic and planning process. In spite of my good intentions, my patients seemed to think that I had cooked up a sneaky way to get them to unnecessarily spend more money on their mouth. I quickly realized that if I didn't improve my communication skills simultaneously with my clinical skills, I would go nowhere and my dream would die.

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In a Spirit of Caring is conducting a series of interviews with the pioneers and practitioners of the health-centered / relationship-based model of practicing dentistry. The interviews provide a fascinating look at people and events that led these individuals to this way of practicing. They also give valuable insight, advice, and resources for dentists seeking ways to enhance the way they practice.