

Becoming the business

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BY JACK ROSSI

any dentists are passionate about clinical work, but executing the business side of the profession is nearly as essential for building and sustaining a successful private practice. Success requires more than leveraging masterful clinical skills, it involves creating efficiencies, growing a patient base, and navigating inevitable financial challenges.

Brian James ('87 DDS), a first-generation dentist, retired as a private practice dentist in rural Iowa and now focuses on helping the next generation of dentists create successful private practices and avoid common mistakes. "I retired in 2019 after practicing for 32 years," says James, "When I practiced I did pretty much all the procedures, but my niche was extractions, and I became proficient at it. I kept track up to about 25,000 extractions, including diagnosing eight oral malignancies. When I walked in at 7:30 a.m. until leaving at 5:30 p.m., in order to maximize my efficiency during the day, I was all business — the mindset was like flipping a light switch."

James started Monticello Family Dentistry, Stone Creek Dental in Dyersville, and Cedar Ridge Dental, which he sold to his associate in 2007. He practiced solo and in a group, employing multiple dentists, hygienists, and an orthodontist. His approach to patient care extended beyond his procedures and his business acumen allowed him to integrate community outreach programs into his practice, providing thousands of dollars in free dentistry each year.

"We offered free athletic mouth guards for anybody that wanted one,"

says James, "While I did not serve the Medicaid population, I provided free dental care in the early years through Drs. with a Heart Program and later in my career provided approximately \$25,000 in free dentistry to the community each year per office. There is a tremendous need and we tried to help as many folks as possible."

The tips and tricks he learned in part came from the generation of dentists before. His mentors are many and you can find them listed on his website, many of whom served as College of Dentistry faculty. He recalls the warm welcome he received from his colleagues when he entered the profession.



savvy DDS

"When I graduated, the older docs welcomed me, and I always tried to do the same. That meant so much to me and I want to repay the favor. This is my mission. I look forward to helping young dentists fast track their careers," says James, "I absolutely loved owning and practicing in rural Iowa. You can only hunt and fish so much in retirement, so after five years, I created the website mentoringdentist.com as my way of giving back to dentistry and providing what worked for me in 32 successful years of private practice dentistry.

mentoringdentist.com is a passion project of James in hopes of providing young dentists the tools and knowledge to thrive in a private practice and bridge the gap between clinical expertise and business efficiency. The website includes blog posts, tips, products, consulting, and more that allow dentists to learn from James' experiences as a private practice dentist.

"The focus of the site is severable downloadable courses for a nominal fee and this program is really all any dentist needs as it will serve as a template for a successful private practice," says James. "Some dentists don't know how to schedule, how to lead, how to compensate their staff, how to establish consistent cash flow, or how and when to bring on an associate. My experiences allow me to talk about all of that and I make it easy to understand," says James.

However, James explains that today's landscape means graduating dental students need to mind the business aspect more than before. Many students are leaving dental school with a lot of student debt and that may seem unmanageable. James reassures that there is hope in carving a successful path forward while ensuring high-quality patient-centered care.

"People are leaving dental school with \$350,000 to \$600,000 in debt and that is a huge hole to climb out of," says James, "You've lost eight of your primary earning years while in school. What I aim to share is that there is hope that you can own a successful practice and recoup that money, but you must start thinking of this since you are getting a late start. I want to help any way I can."

Through mentoringdentist.com, James shares his knowledge on everything from practice management to patient care. His goal is simple: to equip the next generation with the skills they need to succeed, just as the mentors before him did.

"If you focus on taking care of your patients and focus on taking care of your staff, the rest will take care of itself. If you're only in it for the money, that will also elude you and you'll never have enough."



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