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VolunteerforGood

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Dear Fellow Docs,

For most of us, the thought of retirement is a bit abstract. Sure, we try to fund our pension plans and invest wisely, but at the same time we are growing our practices and nurturing our families. The nurturing part is often accompanied by staggering tuition bills.

So we put off thinking about it as something done later in life. Many of us are eager to work fewer hours, but the thought of working no hours is as unfamiliar to us as sleeping in during the work week. In fact, a lot of us are terrified at the prospect, even though we are working harder and longer hours than we would prefer. Part of the reason is that we derive a great deal of personal and professional satisfaction in delivering dental care to our patients. Our identities are often tied to what we do chairside. Practice provides a network of contacts: patients, colleagues, employees, vendors, and a place for these contacts that brings satisfaction and meaning to our lives. Even though it may be tough to get out of bed on Monday morning, we cannot conceive of losing these relationships.

About six years ago, the pain in my neck finally demanded attention. After over 25 years of teaching and practice I was forced to admit that things had to change. Practicing the same number of hours, with the same intensity was no longer possible. A scan revealed some ugly changes in C4, C5 that forced me to restrict the hours practiced. Over the next two years, things gradually worsened until I had to stop seeing patients entirely in January 2003. My thoughts: “Whaddamy gonna do now?”

There I was at 56, all dressed up with no place (re:office) to go. Like you, I had immersed myself in the delivery of health care, in my case, endodontics. Being on the faculty at UCSF, active in the American Association of Endodontists, and lecturing frequently provided a more than full professional life. Our daughters had graduated from college and were no longer at home. Retirement was no longer an abstraction, but a big, fat reality. Don't get me wrong. Sleeping in during the week is great. No more weekend call is divine. But what about the gratification of relieving patients of excruciating pain, of working with staff and colleagues, of having some place to go?

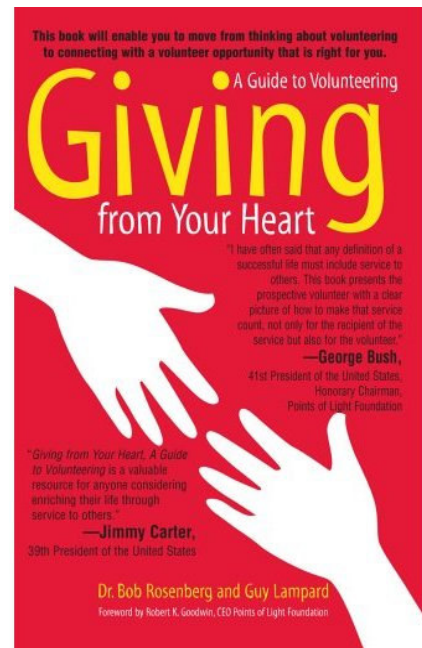
The problem faced was trying to fill in that enormous part of life associated with practice. Instead of working within a community of care-givers in a familiar and comfortable place, I found myself rattling around our daughter-deserted home on my wife's daytime turf. Missing from my new life was the meaning and joy that are derived from doing the important work of being a health care provider.

Over the past few years, I've taken the time to give this a lot of thought, and accept that my conclusions and actions may not be the same as yours. There are, however, some things of which I am fairly certain. In order for us to be maximally happy and fulfilled we need to create balance in our lives. Work/school, recreation/avocation, family/relationships and spirituality/community involvement are the four cornerstones of our existence. Our lives are a constant juggling to balance

these components and we do it better at some times and not so good at others. Unfortunately, the work component often crowds out the others and we are out of balance. Too much time at the office and not enough for our families, ourselves and our communities is the default mode for most. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, it was probably true for me as well.

Filling that inner need is the challenge. Life doesn't end when we retire. We are healthier, more active and expect to live longer than our parent's generation and want to add to our communities rather than detract. Many of us either continue to teach or start teaching at a dental or hygiene school. Volunteering to deliver dental care locally or abroad provides great rewards for others. For me, the starting point was to collaborate with Guy Lampard in the writing of *Giving from Your Heart, A Guide to Volunteering*.

We learned a great deal in the research and writing, about volunteers, volunteering and about ourselves. Among the most important lessons realized is the fact that we are biologically programmed to want to engage in community service, however that is manifested. It may be in continuing to deliver health care, to become a mentor to at-risk youth, to visit the elderly, to restore a stream bank or in a thousand other experiences. Among the facts uncovered is that millions of us want to become involved but simply don't know where to go or who to ask about a volunteer opportunity. The surprising answer is that it is really pretty easy to make to connection. Of primary importance is to find a cause for which you have a passion and to make your connection with an organization that allows you to pursue it. Many of the answers can be found on the pages of *Giving from Your Heart*.



However you do it, your retirement years can be among our most fulfilling, educational and balanced in your entire life. It's up to you to take the first step, but take heart in the comfort that happiness during retirement is attainable and rewarding.

Best regards,

Bob

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If you would like to purchase *Giving from Your Heart*, click this link: <http://www.volunteerforgood.org/>