

Q. Our son is a college student and is considering dentistry as a career choice. He's asked our opinion about dentistry as a profession. Can you help?

A: I speak with a positive bias because I just love the practice of dentistry. That said, the statistic about dentists who are unhappy with their chosen work mimics the statistic for the rest of the population-- startlingly high.

Dentistry is complex, and requires a good bit of multi-tasking. It is truly a blend of science (medicine), art (design and sculpture), engineering (study of bite forces and sustainability), and business (including leadership). People skills, such as connection and communication are critically important, as most dentists who are dissatisfied in dentistry name employment issues as the greatest frustration. Dental education is expensive (the most expensive of all U of M's graduate programs) and rigorous. Upon graduation the private practice dentist has no easy "in", no risk-free investment and no paid vacation. It is a physically demanding profession, hardest on neck, back hands and eyes.

Perhaps the best part is that a private-practice dentist has ultimate influence in their own work. Your son could choose the procedures he likes to do, the hours he works, his co-workers, and really, the entire *culture* of his practice. All in all, I consider dentistry one of the last bastions of independence in health care.

Even though many of us practice independently, there is much pride and camaraderie among our profession. Membership in dental societies is relatively high (about 75%). We are generally trusted and respected by the public. Continuing education is plentiful and varied. Some dentists choose the minimum, and some become life-long, passionate students, pursuing advanced dental education in its full spectrum.

The forecasted need for dental professionals is high, especially in non-urban settings. Dental disease is prevalent and the recognizable links between oral health and systemic disease are huge and growing. Advances in elective (cosmetic and implant) dentistry and adhesion (bond strengths) are thrilling.

And finally, there is incredible intrinsic value in our ability to enhance someone's life almost instantaneously—from mere relief of pain or worry, to the self-esteem explosion instigated from a smile makeover.

I hope this helps you formulate questions for your son, that he might discover if dentistry seems to be a good "fit" for him. As a parent I was recently reminded of the wisdom of Harry S Truman who said with a wink: "I have found the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it."