

A QUESTION ON DENTAL COST

Dear Dr. McCrummen: I went to the dentist recently and spent over \$2,000 for 1 and 1/4 hour of dental work. Why does it cost so much? I am a plumber and only get \$50 an hour. My time is valuable to me so I asked that all my work be finished in one visit, but geez. My wife had a root canal and it cost her about \$1,200 for about 1 1/2 hour. I think we need to look for cheaper dentists. Is a dentist a real doctor? What is the difference? ANON

Yes, a dentist is a real doctor that specializes in the oral cavity. It is more correct to refer to dentists and physicians, rather than dentists and doctors, but it really does not matter to us. Dentists take the same basic medical courses as a physician, but instead of getting the MD, we get a DDS (Doctor of Dental Surgery), or DMD (Doctor of Dental Medicine), which are the same; the designation is decided on by the school. Both DDS and MD typically require a 4 year degree before being accepted into professional school. The first two years at the dental university I attended involved taking medical school classes with medical students at the medical school, as well as dental classes at the dental school. In the third and fourth year dentists focus on clinical dentistry and medical students focus on many different types of medical rotations, and then more in the field they desired to pursue. Most dental schools incorporate medical classes into their dental curriculum at the dental school. There are specialties within medicine and dentistry that require even more formal education.

Regarding the amount you paid, the dentist does not personally make that amount of money per hour, or anywhere near it. Consider your dentists costs to provide dental healthcare. Your dentist most likely is purchasing, renting, or leasing the office building, and typically has well over \$500,000 worth of equipment and supplies which must be maintained, upgraded, and replaced, and pays from two to six staff members professional level wages and benefits for each hour. Costs of operating a dental office can easily be 80% of what is made to cover other overhead, such as utilities, insurance, continuing education for the dentist and staff, maintenance, repairs, donations to organizations, schools, and individuals, and many, many more expenses; and then there are taxes. Just the chair that you sit in can easily cost more than a new car.

A dental office is like a mini-hospital or surgical center. Dentists diagnose oral disease (which can be medical or dental) and treat it or refer to specialists, provide emergency care, and help maintain good health. Though our patients are usually not under general anesthesia we perform hard tissue surgical procedures with local anesthesia, and sometimes sedation, for fillings, caps, removal of teeth, root canals, dentures, bridges, gum/bone surgery, biopsies, laser treatment, chemotherapy, cleanings, and many other things to help people with oral disease and problems. It costs a lot to be able to provide the variety of services in one office, usually owned by one person. To start a new dental business today can easily cost over 1 million dollars if high tech equipment and materials are used.

Regarding the time spent on your treatment, modern technology allows for treatment to be done quicker. That means it costs the dentist more to be able to provide fast and efficient dental care. High quality, and high tech equipment and training, costs the dentist more to make your visits shorter and more comfortable. Most people would be happy to spend less time in the dental chair, rather than have a procedure drag out due to old equipment and outdated skills. Root canals used to take at least two long visits, now it is typically reduced to one shorter visit with improved, advance techniques and materials. "Root canals" require precise, microscopic, internal surgical treatment to save a tooth. If it is at all possible, 1 1/2 hours sounds better to me than two visits and 4 hours, if I was to have a root canal; wouldn't your wife agree? As you stated, your time is worth something and you wanted all of your dental treatment done in one visit. It sounds like your dentist accommodated you, must have planned for it, and used the right materials and equipment to get your work done fast.

In my experience, many people have a hard time justifying dental care expenses when they have no pain. Meaning, if a filling is needed, an old filling is cracked, or a tooth is cracked, and there is no pain, it can be hard to pay for something that does not hurt. A major problem is many people wait for there to be pain before they come in, then it can hurt, and usually costs more, as the problem has gotten to the nerves and requires more extensive/expensive treatment. The best time for treatment of any disease is before it becomes painful, so early diagnosis and treatment is best.

There is a saying, "Don't look for cheaper deals in Brain Surgery, Parachutes, or Dentistry". Most people do not like to go to the dentists at all. About 70% of the population avoids the dentist until there is pain. Those that do see a

dentist would prefer to have things done comfortably, fast, and in the best way so they do not have to return to have it done over and pay twice. You stated that you are a plumber. Is it wise for people to search for the cheapest plumber that uses the cheapest faucets, and cheapest toilets, and the cheapest materials?

My advice is, if you are happy where you are going, feel you are being treated well, and trust your dentist, that is very important and worth staying there. If you are not happy, and do not value the care you are getting, ask people that you know which dentist they like and try them out. I advise against "cheap" as your guideline for healthcare. Your health is the most important thing you have. Without good health and comfort what do you have?