

Perspectives

DR. VINCE KOKICH: TRIBUTE TO A TEACHER'S TEACHER



Unbeknownst to many in dentistry, on September 5, 2009, Dr. Vincent G. Kokich gave his final “official” public lectures in the CE arena. Fittingly, these lectures were delivered in the country of his heritage, Croatia. Interestingly, he was joined in Dubrovnik in his speaking retirement by noted orthodontist Dr. Bjorn Zachrisson as well. By all accounts, Vince’s lectures were “classic Kokich.” By that I mean they were clear, systematic, evidence-based, and exquisitely delivered: all characteristics that have typified this “teacher’s

teacher.” Upon learning of Vince’s decision to forego further professional lectures, I was both saddened and impressed. Saddened to hear that one of the finest teachers I have ever known has elected to retire from the “circuit,” but impressed that he desired to exit the stage of dental continuing education at the pinnacle of his career.

All too often, we in dentistry extol the contributions and virtues of our colleagues only upon their passing. I have often wished I had expressed my gratitude more heartily to dental giants such as Lloyd Miller, Lennie Abrams, Frank Celenza, and others, who so positively affected our profession before they were no longer with us. In that vein, I write this tribute to Vince not only because of the many contributions he has made to the *Journal of Esthetic and Restorative Dentistry*, but also because of the profound impact his teachings have had upon the dental profession at large.

Upon assuming the role of editor-in-chief of the *Journal* in 1999, I established a group of section editors upon whom I could rely for regular editorial guidance.

Fortunately for the *Journal*, Dr. Vince Kokich agreed to serve as section editor for Orthodontics at that time, and he has served in that capacity admirably ever since. I am deeply indebted for the service and contributions Vince has made to the *Journal*. Many of the most strategic and successful changes were those recommended and supported at board meetings by Vince. For example, it was Vince who suggested we add a unique Guest Commentary from a topic expert to follow each article published in the *Journal*. This feature has been highly successful, and some of the Commentaries themselves even have been cited in the literature independent of articles with which they are associated because of their valuable insights. But the contributions Vince has made to the *Journal* pale by comparison with those he has made to the dental profession at large.

In a previous Perspectives feature back in 2003 (15:3) titled, “All Hail the Teachers,” I extolled

the virtues of genuine teachers, and contrasted the “show-and-tell” speakers with true teachers. As noted in that Perspectives feature, Dr. Vince Kokich epitomizes the essence of a real teacher. Citing my observations of a lecture Drs. Kokich and Spear had made at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry, I noted “no media flamboyance or extraneous fluff, no chest beating or multiple examples of ‘look at me, see what I can do,’ and no aimless display of multiple case examples without a coherent message. No, on the contrary. They (Kokich and Spear) took a complex subject, identified the problem, provided a systematic, evidence-based approach for dealing with the problem, and finished with a concise, effective summary. Teaching at its best.”

In the realm of his own specialty, orthodontics, no contemporary academicians or speakers have been held in higher esteem than Vince Kokich. A devout “disciple” of Dr. William Proffit, a legend in orthodontics, Vince similarly has fostered evidence-based information in the realm of orthodontics. As noted by Dr. Proffit,

“In his many years as a half-time faculty member at the University of Washington, Vince served as the Department of Orthodontic’s Research Director. He made major

contributions to orthodontics in that role, more than most full-time faculty in a similar role have accomplished. That’s another illustration of how hard and how effectively he works. Despite his many research contributions, his successful effort in recent years toward better integration of orthodontics into complex treatment plans for adults has to be considered his major professional contribution. He stimulated dentists in all types of practice to work together better, which has led to better treatment across the board, not just in orthodontics.”

As highlighted by Dr. Proffit, beyond the expertise Vince displayed in his own specialty is his understanding of interdisciplinary concepts that he has so effectively team-taught with his colleagues Drs. Frank Spear and David Mathews. Granted, there have been many great teachers in dentistry. However, in my opinion, what makes Vince so unique is his ability to relate to a wide array of audiences. Not only has Vince had the talent to address his colleagues in orthodontics on matters of the highest intellectual level, but also he has been able to meaningfully relate to the average general practitioner on matters of interdisciplinary concepts.

As I have noted before, Vince also displays the very traits that have

been shown in research by noted educational psychologist Dr. N. L. Gage to be those most characteristic of a good teacher. He exhibits mastery of the subject matter, is cognitively well organized, and has the ability to establish warm relationships through his humility without tainting the message with arrogance or an air of superiority. In my opinion, it is this combination of traits that has made Vince so popular as a teacher among his orthodontic colleagues and general practitioners alike. Fittingly, Vince along with Frank Spear received the very first President’s Award from the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry. This award was established specifically to recognize teaching excellence. Clearly, Vince is a teacher in the truest sense of the word.

Vince Kokich not only mentored other speakers by example, but also made a concerted effort to teach us how to be good teachers. On a number of occasions, Vince and his daughter, Mary, gave superb presentations on the principles of presentation excellence. They also published this information as a guide for those aspiring to be effective podium teachers. In my opinion, Vince single-handedly improved the quality of postgraduate education worldwide over the years by constantly promoting these teaching principles coupled with the highest order of ethical standards.

Clearly, Vince has excelled in many endeavors over his storied career in dentistry. He has fostered a greater understanding of orthodontic and interdisciplinary concepts among many in dentistry. However, in my opinion, his most significant legacy may be the standard of excellence

he has set for all clinical teachers both today and in the future.

Vince, please accept a heartfelt *thank you* for your immeasurable contributions to the *Journal* and to dentistry! We wish you all the best in retirement.

Harald O. Heymann, DDS, MEd

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