



# Optimal Oral Health

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## A MISMATCHED SET

by Christian B. Sager, Executive Director

Although I am not a dentist, I have spent nearly four decades working alongside them on a daily basis. My experiences have helped me form some fundamental beliefs about dentists and their motivations. As a group, they aim to please their patients. They are generally uncomfortable with any type of confrontation or unpleasantness, and thus they are likely to let us, their patients, direct the course of our dental care. They often won't assert opinions unless we invite them to do so. Unfortunately, this may not be in our long term best interest. We don't know what we don't know, and if our doctor only reacts to our requests for repair of painful or unsightly dental problems, we are missing out on the optimal comprehensive dentistry our dentist has been learning.

For over three decades, the Pankey Institute has witnessed the benefits of patient involvement in decisions about their oral health care. The input of the patient and the patient's "ownership" of personal health are extremely important. We also know that patients benefit most when their dentist "leaves the comfort zone" to broach the subject of what more is possible to optimize health, function, comfort and beauty over the patient's lifetime. One of the Institute's primary functions is to help the dentist become comfortable discussing optimal oral health care options.

What I do know for sure is that only fixing what is broken is a prescription for a mismatched set of teeth. The farther down life's road we go, the more we will appreciate having placed an early value on our oral health and our doctor's ability to envision a preferred dental future. Fixing one tooth at a time, without a comprehensive understanding of its role in the overall system, is like adding an unmatched golf club to a calibrated set of professional class clubs. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, and a lot depends on the adaptability of the owner.

The comprehensive oral health evaluation is critical to forming a comprehensive plan for achieving your esthetic and oral health goals, if you have them. If you haven't thought about the future of your teeth, begin now. The earlier you invest your time and money in responsible oral health care, the more likely you are to keep your teeth comfortably functioning and naturally beautiful for a lifetime.

The good news is that dental knowledge, materials, tools and skills have advanced to the point where your dentist can artfully help you remain dentally young and healthy, irre-

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spective of your chronological age. I recommend thinking past the immediacy of a problem and the quickest, least expensive fix. Help your Pankey Institute-trained dentist in developing the best plan for keeping your natural teeth for the rest of your life. An interest in understanding the benefits of comprehensive oral health care now will pay youthful health dividends later.