

Media portrayal of oral health professionals: an unfair image?

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Kramer: Those people, listen to yourself.

Jerry: What?

Kramer: You think that dentists are so different from me and you? They came to this country just like everybody else, in search of a dream.

Jerry: Kramer, he's just a dentist.

Kramer: Yeah, and you're an anti-dentite.

Jerry: I am not an anti-dentite!

Kramer: You're a rabid anti-dentite! Oh, it starts with a few jokes and some slurs. "Hey, denty!" Next thing you know you're saying they should have their own schools.

Jerry: They do have their own schools!

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This is how the 1990s sitcom *Seinfeld* coined the term anti-dentite, meaning people who hate or dislike dentists. (Available from: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=anti-dentite>). Disappointedly, this dislike of dentists has been a common theme in the arts for many years. In literature, TV and movies, oral health professionals (generally a dentist) are likely to be portrayed as sadistic (e.g., getting pleasure from causing unnecessary pain), unethical (e.g., falling in love with patients), or with deviant personalities, dangerous psychopaths who use their knowledge, tools and skills for dubious and evil purposes. Oral health professionals are rarely shown in the same way as medical doctors, that is serious, caring, sometimes paternalistic/maternalistic towards his/her patients, but always as healers and role models.

For no good reason, oral health professionals in fiction belong to a separate league. But how, and why, is the dental profession shown this way? Several explanations are likely. For example, within the concept of health, oral health is rated by the public as less important, oral health professionals have less political power and there are other historical, environmental, cultural, financial and health systems factors which aggravate these perceptions.

Ask any one around you to name a movie about dentists, and many will suggest *Marathon man*, where Laurence Olivier used dental techniques to interrogate and torture prisoners. Alternatively, some will mention *A little shop of horrors*, featuring another sadistic dentist. Those inclined to cult movies may mention Almodovar's *What have I done to deserve this?* featuring a paedophile dentist.

Movies about dentists, although they may not be Oscar, Palm d'Or or Pudú material, generally use one of two themes around dentists: either

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dentists are butchers, or, more related to the horizontal position, dentists (male or female, yes there are some female dentist characters in movies too) are sexual predators. It appears there are no limits to the negative stereotyping of oral health professionals, with little if any criticism. Such stereotyping seems to go unchecked. Nothing is being done to stop this anti-dentite effect.

There are more benign dentist characters in movies and on TV, but at best these are usually depicted as conservative, traditional, introverted (maybe with low-self-esteem?), serious and boring, usually wearing ties and dark suits. As mentioned most characters are male, but there are a few female dentists (*e.g.*, Captives; Thanks God it's Friday).

The reality is that most oral health professionals are in clinical careers and do not fit either the extreme stereotypes or the more benign but dull images. And there are many examples of dentists taking up exceptional and interesting careers such the former presidents of Argentina and Turkmenistan. Many are/were Members of Parliament (*e.g.*, Dr. Rabindranath Saavedra, a Chilean senator) and hold other public offices (Mayors, Ministers, etc.). In Iceland, the national soccer team is coached by a dentist, Dr Heimir Hallgrímsson. The team reached the quarter-final of UEFA Euro 2016 cup for the first time, after defeating England. The late Dr Ramon Rojas, who held a world record for the highest base jumping (4.100 mts), was also a dentist. Prof Alfonso Leng, the founding Chair of periodontics at the University of Chile and later Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry, was also a musician, who in 1957 was awarded the Chilean national prize for Art. As a musician, he would be remembered for *The Death of Alsino*, a symphonic poem, and the beautiful and important piano pieces, the five Doloras. These are just some 'good dentist' examples. Throughout history there have been many others politicians, writers, musicians, and sports people, all oral health professionals who utilised their knowledge, skills and experience in oral health for the good of the people.

Why is this wrong portrayal of oral health professionals important? Why is it a professional concern? These offensive

stereotypes are reductionist, but they may also be having a tremendous effect on the oral health of the population. The media has a powerful role in forming people's perceptions and these negative stereotypes about oral health and oral health professionals, further deter people from seeking oral health care when required. These negative images also encourage people not to follow oral health professional's instructions and guidance.

While such portrayals are frustrating and even offensive for oral health professionals, they cannot be dismissed. Such images also reinforce the idea that when patients reflect on their experiences with oral health care, they will be negative and frustrating experiences, usually related to pain.² Of course, these views should be seen in the context of a lack of satisfaction with services due to cost, long waiting periods, and other barriers to oral health care. However, they should be addressed, as it has been shown that patients who respect and like health professionals are more likely to cooperate and follow treatment instructions.³

It is possible that these portrayals and stereotypes of oral health in the media may change in the future, or that as a result of education and increased awareness, health literacy, etc., the community will work through these misconceptions to arrive at meaningful insights. In any case, resolving these misperceptions around oral health, should go a long way towards reducing the gap between experiencing signs and symptoms and being proactive in seeking care and treatment.

Despite the fact that we, as a profession might have "limited" power to determine the topic of movies and sitcoms, at least in a global context, we do have the power to influence our standing in the community and the community's perception's about oral health professionals. Achieving this change should be seen as part of our community health responsibility and advocacy role. Oral health professionals need to use any available opportunity to work through and challenge these contradictions and misconceptions, to ensure that oral health promotions program and oral health care services can achieve the expected effect.

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