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Why are dental costs so pricey and variable?

Dentistry is a profession that is both art and science. It should not be treated as a commodity where comparison shopping is based on price alone. There are many reasons why a treatment plan quoted by one dentist may vary greatly from that of another dentist and why the associated costs for each procedure may also differ.

Dentists often have different treatment philosophies. One dentist may be more conservative than another in choosing whether or not to treat a tooth. For example, some dentists may be willing to "watch" a stained groove or a crack in a tooth, while others may choose to go ahead and place a filling or a crown in hopes of preventing deeper decay or a larger fracture that could then require root canal therapy.

Dentists participation in dental insurance plans can cause fees to vary between practices. Participating dentists accept reduced payments from the insurance companies and patients. Because they must "write-off" any additional fees not agreed upon by the insurance companies, they must also lower their costs in order to be profitable. This may involve reducing the amount of time spent with each patient as well as using less expensive materials and labor, all of which could result in less-than-ideal restorations or treatment results. Also, dental insurance needs to be viewed as nothing more than minor cost assistance. The maximum benefit most insurance plans allow is around \$1500. That number has not changed over the past several decades, so after a couple of dental cleanings, there is usually only enough left to pay a portion of one crown. The plan will not do much for you if you need a lot of dental work.

Sometimes, even a well-quoted and thought out treatment plan can change mid-procedure. If upon excavation of decay in a tooth, a dentist finds that the decay extends farther than what was visible on an x-ray or with magnified vision, the tooth that was thought to have a medium-sized cavity may now need a build-up, crown, root canal, and even periodontal surgery. This can easily turn a \$200 procedure into a \$3500 one.

Although patients may view dental procedure fees as high, dentists profit margins are fairly small. Anywhere from 60-80% of what you are charged goes toward the cost of running a dental office. Dentists have the expenses of laboratory fees, equipment and technology, specialized staff, dental materials, and business insurance. Many dentists may still be paying for student loans and/or loans for the initial purchase of the practice.

In the end, you will get the most satisfaction from receiving care from a dentist you trust, not by getting the lowest priced treatment. If you really want to save money, think PREVENTION: brush, floss, and use mouth rinse; stay away from sugary drinks and candy; and see your dentist for regular check-ups.