

# Hard to Say Good-bye

BERNARD P. TILLIS AWARD-WINNING ESSAY

*Stuart L. Segelnick, D.D.S., M.S.*

TEN YEARS AGO a wonderful patient entered my practice. What I remember of that encounter is very little. She was 73 years old back then, and her hair was graying. She spoke in very gentle tones, and she initially struck me as educated and kind. Although she reminded me in every way of my grandma, in reality, she was probably the grandmother anyone would ever hope to have.

She was referred to me initially by her general dentist for periodontal surgery. After her treatments, her dentist felt, due to her severe periodontal disease, it would be in her best interest to continue her three-month periodontal maintenance therapy at my office. Her dentist would see her at least once a year for a full dental evaluation and any necessary management.

For the past 10 years, this wonderful patient would return every three months. Now, going through her chart, I'm genuinely surprised to see she did not miss one appointment! I wonder how many of my colleagues can find that quality of patient, a true Lou Gehrig of dental patients. I remember many of our conversations through the years of how proud she was of her daughter and daughter-in-law, who were both registered nurses, and her grandchildren, who were attending college. Though she didn't come out and say it, I felt from her stories, how difficult it was for an African-American to come by such education in the 1930s through the 1950s, when she was of college age.

Yesterday, when she came in for her three-month visit, I walked into the operatory and went directly to the sink to wash my hands. My back was to her when I asked her, "How have you been?" "Oh, not very good," she replied. As I dried my hands I turned to her and was surprised to see my long-time patient looking frail and a bit bloated. "What's going on?" I slowly prompted. "I'm sorry I canceled my last appointment and had to cancel three others," she said. As she said this I was looking through the chart and noticed the last time she came in was five months ago. "But I was very sick. They found that I have breast cancer and it has metastasized into my lungs... stage four." As she spoke, I noticed her labored breathing.

At that moment I felt like the proverbial deer, frozen by the headlights of a car racing unforgivingly forward. I may have said "I

can't believe it" or "I'm so sorry." I'm not sure. But by the time I realized who I was again, I was sitting next to her telling the story of my mother, who I lost to ovarian cancer when she was only 56 years old. It was a story she had heard before, and I noticed her nodding that she remembered. We talked about her family and all their accomplishments, but I saw that was a mistake, as she got all misty-eyed. My mouth then just said on its own, "God should grant you a full recovery." She looked up into the sky and said without missing a beat, "It's all in God's hands."

What happened afterward were phone calls to her physician and oncologist trying to determine if any antibiotic coverage was needed. The hygienist had already performed some of the scaling and I asked my patient why she didn't tell the hygienist of this important change in her medical history. "I wanted to tell you first," was her reply. At that point I had to turn away, as a tear fell down my face.

I have had 10 years of feeling a person's trust, listening to the good, the bad, the interesting, the boring, the bland, the exciting. I love my profession and enjoy the interaction, although times like these are horrible. Because life always ends, I cherish the times we have had and the hope that is always present.

After 10 years of seeing and speaking, treating and caring for someone at least four times a year, I realized I have more of a relationship with my patients than I have with many of my friends and family. I know I will pray every day for her recovery, but, unfortunately, I am jaded. I have had too much familiarity with people's illnesses and have seen too many people pass on from this late-stage cancer.

Looking back to yesterday, I wanted to give my patient a hug; I wanted to tell her she was the best patient I've ever had. I wanted to let her know that I will always care about her. "Would this be proper?" I thought. I found myself up by the front desk, stunned and wordless, when the secretary asked to schedule her next three-month appointment. My patient said, "God willing," as she set up the appointment.

## Council Selects **Stuart Segelnick** to Receive Tillis Award



NYSDA President Robert Doherty, left, congratulates Stuart Segelnick, winner of Bernard P. Tillis Award. Dr. Segelnick received his award at ceremony marking his installation as president of Second District Dental Society.

STUART L. SEGELNICK, D.D.S., M.S., a periodontist who practices in Brooklyn, is winner of the 2010 Bernard P. Tillis Award for excellence in dental writing. Dr. Segelnick was selected to receive the award, presented by the NYSDA Council on Membership and Communications, for his essay "Hard to Say Goodbye," which appeared in the November 2009 Bulletin of the Second District Dental Society. His winning essay, a tribute to a long-time patient, appears on the facing page. Dr. Segelnick received an inscribed plaque.

The Tillis Award was established in 1996 to honor the memory of the longtime *New York State Dental Journal* editor. It recognizes members of the Dental Association who, through their writing in *The NYSDJ* or in a component publication, promote a positive image of organized dentistry.

Dr. Segelnick was installed as president of the Second District in January. He is clinical associate professor in the Department of Periodontology and Implant Dentistry at NYU College of Dentistry and clinical assistant professor in the Department of Periodontology at Columbia University College of Dental Medicine. A 1992 graduate of the University of Buffalo School of Dental Medicine, he did his graduate work in periodontology at Temple University School of Dentistry in Philadelphia.