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S. Jay Bowman, DMD, MSD
with patient Kagen Miller

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Inventor S. Jay Bowman, DMD, MSD, creates simple solutions for healthy smiles

by Rich Smith

With its wall of theater posters and memorabilia from popular kids' movies, the main southwest Michigan office of S. Jay Bowman, DMD, MSD, may not look like an inventor's laboratory. However, based on his experience with patients, Bowman has developed a number of orthodontic products that help streamline treatment requirements—among them new types of brackets and fresh applications for old-style springs.

But perhaps Bowman's most significant invention is the technique known as Class II Combination Therapy. This method pairs molar distalization and fixed functionals to reduce the inefficiency of two-phase treatment plans and reliance on unpredictable patient compliance.

"I developed this technique more than 10 years ago after I noticed that nonextraction cases, especially Class II's, were the least predictable to complete on time with acceptable results, unlike extraction cases," says Bowman, whose solo practice operates under the name Kalamazoo Orthodontics PC in the city of Portage. "I realized that one of the primary variables was the cooperation of patients, and I began to investigate methods to reduce my dependence on them.

"I began combining the concept of distalizing maxillary molars to Class I, followed by fixed functional appliances to maintain the new molar position as the remaining maxillary spaces were closed," he says. "The result was an efficient, one-phase treatment with full fixed appliances that could be applied, typically, to mild and moderate Class II's at about age 12."

Filling a Need

Several of Bowman's ideas came to him while sunning on a beach during a family vacation.

"My wife thought I had gone insane—there I was, sprawled out on the sand, sketching away like mad in a notebook," he says. "I was supposed to be relaxing and not thinking about work. I couldn't convince her that what I was doing was indeed very relaxing."

Not to mention gratifying. "I like to solve problems and create things, and when I invent something, I usually start with a problem that exists right in my own practice and needs a solution that no manufacturer has yet come out with," he says. "I take matters into my own hands and look for a solution."

But always a simple solution, he adds. In fact, the simpler the solution the better.

"Most recently, I designed some new springs to improve the pre-dictability of drawing

impacted teeth into position," he says. "The springs were very basic, and there was nothing sophisticated about them at all. They were just a simple way to get the job done more easily."

For all of his labor, none of these inventions is likely to reward Bowman with fabulous riches.

"Bill Gates-wealthy I'll never be from orthodontic ideas," he says. "The springs for impacted teeth, as an example, cost very little in the scheme of things. There's no way I'd ever expect to generate more than some pocket change from those. Mainly these inventions are intended to help me in my practice with the treatment of my patients. If some financial gain comes from one of them, great. If not, it wasn't expected in the first place."

"Perhaps years down the road, my inventing may show itself as a lucrative proposition. But until then, there are many costs I have to deal with, such as the expense of documenting the validity and appropriateness of the inventions. With Class II Combination Therapy, I've elected to follow my patients with organized, meticulously maintained records that have been made available to university researchers—seven studies at three universities, thus far—and to manufacturers. It's one thing to make claims, but quite another to document them. For an orthodontist with a busy private practice, this additional record-keeping becomes a cumbersome administrative chore as well as a financial drain."

One major orthodontic products manufacturer has purchased rights to make and market several of Bowman's invention ideas. Occasionally, the manufacturer gives Bowman product concepts to develop.

"The company I work with had an idea for a new, low-profile bracket system that included a vertical slot," Bowman says. "The company asked me to evaluate it and offer suggestions for improving it. So, we collaborated on the design of this new bracket system and the pre-adjusted prescription for it. The collaboration was a success, and the product was introduced to market this past spring."

Bowman says his relationship with this and other manufacturers came about purely by happenstance. He cites his alliance with the maker of the two existing products that form the basis of his Class II Combination Therapy as an example.

"I had written a couple of articles about the technique for our local dental journal," he says. "One day, a representative from the manufacturer was visiting my office. While he waited to see me, he was leafing through a journal issue that carried one of my articles. He saw the article, read it, and then, when our meeting began, he suggested I come talk to his company about my ideas. I accepted the invitation."

"The company at first asked me to speak on the subject of Class II Combination Therapy for different groups at various meetings," he says. "Later, they asked me to evaluate their appliance, then make suggestions for improving it. One thing led to another and, before long, I had an ongoing relationship with the company. I began keeping a notebook of ideas, problems, and potential solutions that I could continue to offer them and then be involved in their development."

The Personal Touch

Many of the creations spun from Bowman's imagination have yet to reach the marketplace. "They're in the pipeline, but it turns out that new product introductions take a long time and there are many twists and turns along the way," he says.

However, Bowman's patients know the products are com-

ing—in fact, many of them have been treated with them during development.

"It impresses some patients that the appliance they're wearing is something I personally had a hand in producing," he says. "But there is a flip side. Some patients see that I've invented this new bracket, for instance, and they wonder if it's any good, since it's home grown. Fortunately, these patients are in the very small minority."

Bowman characterizes his practice as one that is about as large as a solo practitioner dividing his time among clinic, laboratory, and lectern (he teaches at the University of Michigan) can comfortably handle. Currently, Bowman has seven chairside assistants and several other staff who are cross-trained for the role. Future growth would most likely oblige Bowman to recruit an associate—something he is not eager to do just yet.



Bowman shows patients proper brushing technique with a model featuring his new braces system.

Bowman launched his practice in 1985 after arriving in the city of Kalamazoo from orthodontic residency at Saint Louis University. The school chairman recommended Kalamazoo as an ideal place for a young orthodontist to spread his wings.

"I started by purchasing a small practice with a satellite office and 2 years later acquired a larger practice," Bowman says. "The larger practice had a more desirable and accessible location, so I made that my main office. Then, about 7 years ago, I opened a satellite office in a completely unserved rural area west of Kalamazoo. Last year, I purchased a third small practice—also with an excellent location—and moved my old satellite location there."

In 1999, Bowman designed a new main office, and in 2000, he replaced his satellite office in the city of Paw-Paw. His third office is currently undergoing a facelift. "I've been doing all of this to improve and modernize my service capabilities, which I consider essential to attract as wide a spectrum of patients from as many different walks of life as possible," he says. "I've always felt that practice success is best achieved by not limiting one's focus to just one type of patient."

Certainly no one who tours Bowman's facilities would accuse him of catering to a narrow demographic. By his own admission, his offices are an eclectic mix of styles that merge elements of the Hard Rock Café, Planet Hollywood, and the All-Star Café into one. Bowman's wife, Sherry, created the themes for each part of the office.

"The decor is a reflection of my personal interests," says Bowman, who as a student played in rock bands, owned a



Bowman's kid-friendly office includes this Star Wars display to entertain patients and their siblings while they wait.

record store, and was a radio deejay. "I have always been a collector of all kinds of memorabilia and I'm an avid fan of sports, music, and film. My wife and I figured the way that made the most sense for displaying my collections and interests was to create different themes for different areas of the office."

Accordingly, the main clinic area brims with autographed hockey jerseys, hockey sticks, photographs, a helmet autographed by hockey superstar Wayne Gretzky, and artifacts from other top-name players. A semiprivate adult area is adorned in a car-racing motif, replete with autographed lithographs, model cars, official helmets, and even a tire from NASCAR champion Jeff Gordon's rig.

"We also have a baseball wall of fame with Kalamazoo's Derek Jeter posters and bat, a basketball wall with Shaquille O'Neal's and Grant Hill's autographed shoes and basketballs, and a golf wall with Tiger Woods' autographs," Bowman says. "We have two private rooms that are rock-star galleries filled with autographed guitars, albums, and pictures of the Rolling Stones, Cheap Trick, Van Halen, Kiss, Aerosmith, Elvis Costello, and many others. The radiography area is done in Pokemon, the photography area is in Jurassic Park, and our patient-instruction room is all Warner Brothers cartoon characters."

The movie-themed hallway features a *Star Wars* display including full-size Darth Vader and Chewie heads, hanging space ships, and collector items. Further down the hall, patients are greeted by a lifesize ET and Crypt Keeper, along with a collage of movie posters, portraits, and a *Jaws* shark hanging from the ceiling. "In our clinic area we have hung televisions so our patients can watch music videos, sports events, and cartoons," he says. "We also have a CD-changer to play a variety of music styles."

There's a serious side to the practice, too. Bowman says it manifests itself in a deep commitment to service and quality. "Because quality is so important to me, I still insist on conducting my own treatment consultations, and personally describing treatment needs and the procedures, rather than just relying on a treatment coordinator," he says. "I feel it's important to spend personal time with the patient. I also feel it's important to educate patients and dentists in the latest developments and research in orthodontics. It takes more time to earn trust this way but it is ultimately more satisfying and beneficial to the practice."

Like Clockwork

For Bowman, time is always at a premium, especially in light of his hands-on commitment to his practice and his inventor's workshop. Since Bowman cannot invent a machine to give himself more hours and minutes each day, he has done the next best thing—develop the skills necessary to properly manage the time he has.

Bowman's formula reads like this: successful time management equals self-discipline plus productivity-enhancing efficiencies plus delegation of some responsibilities.

"At the risk of sounding like a motivational guru, to manage your time you must set specific goals, then aim high and set about the business of achieving those goals in an organized manner," he says. "Defeating procrastination is certainly the toughest thing. So, rather than just create 'to-do' lists, I tackle tasks as they come, knocking off one project and then going on to another."

"I also take pains not to waste time in the office. That's one reason why I've positioned my private office right next to the clinic area—if I have any spare time during the day, I step into that room and devote myself to research and writing. Being able to delegate tasks to trusted staff is also important, but it's not nearly as important as being self-disciplined to do the work that's placed in front of you."

It has been suggested to Bowman that he quit practice and become a full-time orthodontic inventor. However, he shrugs off such advice.

"You have to be in practice to successfully develop what you invent," he says. "The practice serves as a laboratory of sorts in which you can perfect and credibly prove your ideas. Besides, my primary interest is in clinical practice so I have no desire to ever give it up to be a full-time inventor." ■

About the Author

Rich Smith is a contributing writer for *Orthodontic Products*.

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