

## How to avoid getting ripped off by dentist

By: Joseph Stromberg

There are plenty of excellent, trustworthy dentists out there who make their patients' interests their top priority.

But there are also some unethical dentists who provide unnecessary treatments and products simply for profit.

I've discovered this after growing up having dental work done by my father, who is now retired. In the years since, while seeing other dentists, my brother has been told he needed six fillings that turned out to be totally unnecessary (based on my dad's look at his X-rays) and I've been pressured to buy prescription toothpaste and other products I didn't need.

Back when he still practiced, my father occasionally saw this kind of thing firsthand. His patients would visit other dentists for an emergency while he was away and be told they needed superfluous crowns or other complex work when a simple filling would have sufficed.

To be clear, this sort of fraud doesn't go on in most dental practices. But experts say it still happens all too often. "There are no precise figures about how widespread dental fraud is. The crime is less than a tsunami and more than a trickle," said James Quiggle of the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud. "The vast majority of dentists are honest and ethical. Even so, more fraud likely is flying under the radar than people realize."

One of the main reasons\* is that, in the United States, dentistry has far less oversight than any other branch of medicine. "For a dentist who practices alone, there's usually no one looking over your shoulder," my father, Sheldon Stromberg, said. "It's easy to take advantage of people. You're basically given a blank check."

Another reason is that dentistry genuinely involves a degree of subjectivity in each diagnosis. Two honest dentists can disagree about whether a tiny fissure requires a filling or not, and all dentists fall on a continuum of philosophies ranging from conservative to aggressive in their treatments. Some dishonest ones, though, abuse this uncertainty to increase their profits.

With this in mind, I spoke to seven dentists — along with Quiggle and the American Dental Association — to get their advice on how to find an honest practice and avoid unnecessary work. Here are their recommendations.

Every single dentist I spoke with offered the same advice for finding a trustworthy practice — ask a friend. "The best way to get a good referral is to ask friends or

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coworkers," said Robert Rose, a family dentist who practices in Pasadena.

If you don't have anyone to ask, other options might be getting a recommendation from a local dental society, or even just asking your doctor who he or she sees.

The one thing you shouldn't do, however, is go to a practice based on an advertisement, especially one that offers a free cleaning, tooth whitening, or other deal. "I would be wary of the big advertisers, who have billboards all over the place and advertise on TV," said Mindy Weinman, who practices in Buffalo and is a professor at the SUNY Buffalo dental school.

Her husband, Dave Weinman — who practices with Mindy and also works as a consultant for an insurance company assessing cases of potential dental fraud — agrees. "I barely see any dental offices, in my area at least, that are heavy advertisers and that I'd feel comfortable recommending," he said.

The reason for this is that advertising-driven offices often use deals as a tool to get patients in the door and then pressure them to accept an expensive treatment plan, whether they need work done or not. Oftentimes, they're corporate-owned chains, like Aspen Dental. "These big chains are kind of dental mills," Mindy Weinman said. "They're the ones that give you the free cleaning, and the free exam, then they tell you that you