

FEATURE INTERVIEW

Feature Interview: Dr. Dana Colson
with Associate Managing Editor

Dr. Colson heads up Dr. Dana Colson & Associates, Wellness Based Dentistry™ in mid - town Toronto. She and her sizable team practice thorough dentistry through a holistic and patient-centered approach, looking at how our mouth affects our whole body.

Dr. Colson, I have walked by your office many times and am delighted to finally meet you! Let's start our chat with where you went to school.

I went to University of Toronto and graduated in 1977. It feels like it was yesterday!

What are your professional affiliations?

Ontario Dental Association; Canadian Dental Association; The Kois Institute in Seattle where I have achieved mentorship status; The Pankey Institute; American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry; The International Academy of Oral Medicine and Toxicology.

What led you to becoming a dentist?

Fear of dentistry! I became a dentist because I was so frightened; I figured if I could overcome my fear, I could help others do the same. I have always felt very empathetic towards those with concerns and anxiety about having dental work. Those who have suffered physical abuse, for example, need to develop a high level of trust before allowing any work to be done; I want them to become a partner when I work because they understand why I do what I do, rather than being a victim in the chair.

Can you outline your career to do date?

Well, I associated for a few years and then I purchased this practice. Continuing education has become a huge focus for my life —I do four to six weeks a year. I used to go to one-day courses, but I found that I never really used the information I got from these and I was getting bored. So I started taking longer, more intense courses where I go outside of Toronto, for example to the Pankey Institute and lately the Kois Institute. These experiences opened up my world. I started to see dentistry so differently ...not just the fixing of an individual tooth but how the mouth is a part of the whole ecosystem of the face and body. I understood how everything is connected and this has become a fascinating part of my work. My quest has never stopped and I feel sad when my friends or colleagues are bored or can hardly wait to finish dentistry because for me I am still looking for all the answers. Human biology is so unique; you can make one pair of shoes but these will not fit everyone the same way. Dentistry is the same; two people may have similar mouths and bites, but one person may have raging TMJ problems and the

other has nothing. So it isn't just teeth, it's the whole person we need to look at, to arrive at a treatment outcome for the individual.

What does a typical week look like for you?

Traditionally I work three days a week; the other days are devoted to following up with patients, the paperwork, the reading and preparation for lectures which I give. Dentistry is not only my work, it's also my hobby and my passion. I wear the same hat wherever I go or for whatever I am doing.

When I was in your office the other day, I noticed that a patient was having a foot treatment while you were working on her mouth. Can you elaborate on this?

Yes, one of my assistants is also a reflexologist. Occasionally, a patient will become nervous. Sandra begins some reflexology, which allows energy to flow through the body and helps to relax the patient. A relaxed patient makes my job easier and their body heal faster. So now Sandra is primarily a reflexologist; we don't charge a fee, it's part of the service as we always strive to have people leave my office feeling healthier and more relaxed than when they arrived.

You make it clear that your practice is an alternative one; what do you mean?

I work with people who want to take responsibility for their health. They ask a lot of questions because they just don't accept that health care providers know everything and are always right. They read a lot so we end up taking a lot of time with our patients answering questions; they see many different kinds of practitioners —naturopaths, chiropractors, massage therapists, physic healers— they want to take responsibility for their own health. I enjoy working with these patients but it does take a lot of extra time knowledge and attention before we even take the first step. We believe in co-diagnosis and co-creation. This approach requires a lot more team support than is found in traditional dental offices.

Tell us about your team.

We are about 30 altogether. Rosemary has worked with me for 33 years in a variety of roles; she went back to school and is now a holistic nutritionist who can educate patients about the effect of certain foods on the body. I have invested heavily in my team; I have six or seven people who have been with me for over twenty years. They understand what we do and why, and with the extra education I have provided they can step in and answer questions, and really help to take the pressure off me; patients have confidence and trust in my team. All this creates a healthier work environment. In fact, when people do leave and go elsewhere and then come back for a visit, they tell me they cannot believe how different this practice is. We grow together, learn together and

share constantly. I don't know any different because this has always been my work culture and always will be.

You recently spoke at the Total health show here in Toronto; what kind of impact does this have on your practice or your patients?

It gives me a chance to share my philosophy. When you have the chance to talk to people for an hour, they can learn a lot, whereas when they come into the office for a specific procedure, you don't have the time for education. A lot of people have misguided views about what dentistry can offer today, so it's my chance to share that dentistry can affect our body in many ways. It can be minimally invasive and still create extraordinary results. So people then start asking more questions and may make the health of their mouth a higher priority.

You reach out to your clients in many ways—your book and your newsletter. How does it work?

The newsletter started in 1992. It was when my father had had a major heart attack and almost died. Miraculously he lived and is now 94. So I decided to write a letter because I like to share what goes on in my life and in this case how healing can occur in many different ways. Then the letter became a yearly tradition, sharing with my patients what has happened that year in my practice and in my life so we can have a better connection.

I have read your excellent book *Your Mouth: A Gateway To A healthier You* (see review on page ??); what impact has the book had on your practice?

The book is primarily a tool, a way of giving out information. It reaches a group of people who are interested in exploring the connection between oral health, whole body wellness and longevity.

You have taught internationally in Cuba, Mexico, the U.S. and China; what did you teach and how were these experiences?

I have taught practice management and the advantages working with lasers; in 1999 in China I talked about easy techniques that we use in Canada that perhaps the Chinese may want to adopt. I also spoke about lasers and that's when they all got excited. What I think is sad is they were not teaching their patients how to floss because "floss is too expensive", but yet they were so excited about the expensive laser technology. I thought to myself that they had lots of fishing line available, which certainly could be adapted and used for floss. Something so simple and basic was not interesting to them at that time.

I think you have a wonderful web site, full of useful information. Not all dentists have web sites; how does yours affect your practice?

Well, everybody is involved in looking things up online, especially Generation Y. Again, it's about sharing information. They can see what the office looks like, and if it's a place they would like to come to. I don't want to waste people's time; I picture myself out on the sidewalk without a dentist; what would I need to know in order to choose one dentist over another?

What are the major challenges you think that dentists face today?

A good question ...the importance of record taking which is so different today from what it was 30 years ago. We live in a litigious world and need to be mindful of this. Also I think there are so many more opportunities now to be minimally invasive and really help future generations avoid an extreme numbers of root canals and crowns. It doesn't have to be this way anymore because of technology and improved knowledge about creating better biting forces for example. People may not need so much dental work in the future, but they still need to protect their bite and ensure their occlusion is in a good position; in this instance Invisalign is a phenomenal tool to broaden and widen smiles. We can look at how the airway and sleep interconnect with how our teeth and jaw are positioned. I am optimistic; the more we understand about physiology and how interconnected everything is, the more effective dentists can be. People no longer have to be hurt at the dentist; people can be healed. We have a world of things to offer the public.

What has changed the most for you over your career?

I think education has allowed me to pursue and understand more, particularly in the alternative world, because I don't believe allopathic medicine is the only way to heal people. Look at China; they have cared for their people for thousands of years using many different modalities, without the tools we have here. So I have always pursued the 'what if' and 'why not'; I don't believe in discarding one option but to add on and give people choice. Of course technology has changed so much through the use of lasers and digital equipment and radiology. We can perform in a kinder, more precise way to restore teeth to their optimal condition.

You are obviously extremely busy; do you have time for any hobbies?

I love food, I love wine and I love cooking. I also enjoy hanging out with my friends and family . I love to travel, and when I do, I search out animals in nature and wait for the moment they open their mouth so I can take a picture of their teeth to try and figure out why their teeth are the way they are. Of course there is my continuing education, and in fact I just recently began an executive MBA. It's a global MBA where you travel

for two weeks to a different part of the world every three months. So that's what I am doing in my spare time!

What do you still want to achieve?

At the end of my presentations I have a slide that says *never let your memories be greater than your dreams*. Every day is a creative day; I know I do want to give back to dentistry because it's been a wonderful profession for me. It's an art, it's a science, it's caring for people, it's helping people feel safe. I work with a fantastic team and we work in a family-like environment. Since I have returned to school, I now find dentistry relaxing and fun! It's changed my perspective and really shown me what a gift we have in dentistry.

What advice do you have for graduates just starting out?

Dentistry can be exciting and fulfilling. Keep on searching, keep on looking, keep on educating yourself. Hone your skills and keep up with technology and research. There are so many things we can do in dentistry to help people. Listen to your patients. Invest in your team. Ask your colleagues for mentors; in dentistry I think we have been too shy in this regard ...we feel we can't go next door to ask for help or information. Dentists need to support each other in this stressful field to maintain their own health.

What about the role of women in dentistry?

Well, the numbers have grown considerably. When I was at school, less than ten percent of students were women. But this imbalance did not bother me; we are all human beings, just love what you do.

How are you involved in your community?

I am on an advisory committee for George Brown Community College and I take on pro bono cases as needed. Whenever I travel, I look for ways to give back in that part of the world and I would like to grow this type of community involvement.

Bottom Line: Taking a holistic approach to practicing dentistry makes a lot of sense; being mindful of one's approach to oral health can only improve overall general health.

PHOTO

Dr. Dana Colson graduated in 1977. She is passionate about continuing education and has become a mentor of the Kois Institute in Seattle where she has completed nine courses. She has also completed Levels 1-6 of Advanced Dental Education at the Pankey

Institute. Dr. Colson has taught internationally and has been featured on radio and television. You can reach her through her practice at 416.482.2133.