

Few people could claim they were destined for their profession more convincingly than Dr. Charles Ferzli, owner of The TMJ & Sleep Therapy Centre of Raleigh-Durham, and his adjacent dental office, Smiles of Cary. Dr. Ferzli didn't so much choose dentistry as dentistry chose him—and many would agree it is a match with many blessings.

"I always wanted to be in the health field," Dr. Ferzli says. "My parents had no formal education, so they really pushed my brother, sisters, and me to get a strong education. I was intrigued with the medical field from an early age, and in my mind, early on, it was either health care or becoming a lawyer," he says with a smile. "But I really just loved science, so I chose chemistry for my undergraduate degree."

Dr. Ferzli completed his bachelor's degree in chemistry at the University of Miami, the town to which, at the age of 17, he followed his parents and much of his extended family, after spending his youth in the Ivory Coast in Africa. "My parents liked Florida because the weather reminded them of home," he says. "And it's beautiful down there; the campus was lovely."

After college, Dr. Ferzli began working as a chemist and truly loved the field. He spent two years doing research, which resulted in a patent in the field of chemistry. However, his experience then led indirectly to his future profession. "Unfortunately," he recalls, "what I began to see was a lot of instability in the company I was working for, with many people being laid off and families needing to relocate. I wanted to be in charge of my income destiny. So, I began looking into things like osteopathic medicine, optometry, podiatry, and chiropractic school. Then, one day, I had a friend who was going to take the admission test for dental school and she asked if I wanted to join her. I didn't know the first thing about dentistry. I didn't know dentists could prescribe medications, for example, or anything other than that they did fillings and extracted teeth. But I went along with her and took the test. I scored well, so I applied to dental school and was accepted."

ON THE PATH

And, Dr. Ferzli says with a smile, he's never looked back. After dental school at the University of Miami, he completed a doctorate in dental surgery at UNC Chapel



It would take several hours to read the certificates of accomplishment that cover the walls of Dr. Ferzli's practices. He randomly chooses to read a certificate to satisfy our photographer.

Years of Study to Promote Health and Relieve Pain

"Dentistry is never, ever routine or uninteresting. Just the opposite"

Hill in 1997, and since has developed extraordinary breadth and depth of expertise in many branches of the field.

People who have a love of learning will admire Dr. Ferzli's accomplishments over the years in gaining knowledge and expertise in his chosen field—and few can emulate the utter love affair Dr. Ferzli has fostered with continuing dental education—at the rate of about 100 hours a year for the past 18 years.

"I always took more courses than I needed to, especially in science," he says. "After a few years as a dentist, I continued my journey with courses from the American Academy of Craniofacial Pain—the AACFP. I took a fellowship course, which covered many approaches and treatment modalities—from injections to oral appliances, to alternative medicine including acupuncture and craniosacral therapy. This led to a fellowship in the Academy of

Craniofacial Pain, which included a written exam judged by a panel of my peers, and a board certification."

His study of craniofacial pain excited a deep interest in dental sleep medicine, because, as he explained, "sleep medicine and craniofacial pain are intimately connected." After another 500 hours of continuing education in dental sleep medicine and several years of patient experience, Dr. Ferzli became eligible to apply for diplomate status. "Following the course work there was a written exam and three patient case presentations graded by the board. After successfully defending all three cases, I became a Diplomate of the Academy of Craniofacial Pain—the AACFP"

Dr. Ferzli went on to earn board certification from the American Board of Craniofacial Dental Sleep Medicine—the ABCDSM—and a second diplomate status as Diplomate of the American Academy of Dental Sleep Medicine.

"There are other Boards I'm planning on taking, including studies with the Academy of Orofacial Pain—which is more medicine-based—learning the ways in which all of the drugs we use interact with the human body." Dr. Ferzli rarely if ever offers treatment solely with medications, but when he does rely on medications for support, he wants "the latest expertise about cause and effect for whatever is going on in the bodies of my patients."

CONVERGING MEDICINE AND DENTISTRY

While all areas of learning intrigue his passion for knowledge, it was his study of craniofacial pain that really hooked Dr. Ferzli. "Craniofacial pain and dental sleep medicine is the convergence of dentistry and medicine," he explains. "It's the closest I'm going to get to practicing medicine—but I'll never have to be on-call 24/7," he says with a smile.


"For example," he goes on, "someone comes in to gain relief for sensitive teeth. In the past, I may have thought about how to

desensitize the teeth—perhaps with various chemicals, or perhaps with a filling, and adjust the bite and testing to find out if they are clenching their teeth causing a nervous system issue.

"Now, I know to delve into questions beyond those basics and inquire about sleep problems. Is this patient waking with a headache, perhaps indicating clenching during sleep? Are they waking up in the night with a locked jaw? Are they waking rested or tired? Answers to these questions can help differentiate between clenching of their teeth or clenching due to an airway problem. From this we can assess the need for a sleep study or a night guard."

Root canals can offer another clue, notes Dr. Ferzli. "Perhaps a patient had several root canals, and no one ever figured out that the teeth died of natural causes from so much clenching due to a problem with the jaw. A patient may come to us with sensitive teeth, and after much investigative work and assessing not just the teeth, but the whole patient picture, we discover that what we really need to address is the breathing problem that is leading to the clenching, and thus resulting in sensitive teeth."

It was Dr. Ferzli's love of continuing education that produced his passion for dentistry. "Someone once told me everything a dentist reads is obsolete within two years, so learning is a continuing process. There are constant changes in this field, and that makes it really important to keep a pulse on each branch of dentistry all the time.

"That works pretty well for me," he says with a smile. "I was a dentist for a long time before I took courses in sleep medicine. It wasn't until that time that I really understood how all parts are related and how all systems need to fit properly together; how adjusting someone's bite can affect their posture, their lower back, or cause foot pain. The connections are amazing—and no one talked about that in dental school! I love dentistry because there's always something new to learn. It is never, ever routine or uninteresting. Just the opposite." 

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