

Dr. Tobias Meiszingger – Finding the right associateship position

Dr. O'Keefe: Today I welcome Dr. Tobias Meiszingger. He is a general dentist working in Calgary, Alberta. And we're going to discuss today his perspectives on associateship in a family dental practice, a traditional dental practice. Tobias could you just give us a little bit of the highlights of your professional career to date please?

Dr. Meiszingger: Sure. John, I, graduated in 2014 from McGill and did a one-year general practice residency out of Calgary here. That's actually what brought me to this city. So I was out here for a year from 2014, 2015 working in a hospital, with sort of medically compromised patients. Really enjoyed it and learned a lot. Then, near the end of my year, I decided, you know, I wasn't done with Calgary yet. I really enjoyed the city, wanted to stay for longer, so I started looking for an associateship position in the city.

Dr. Meiszingger: While I was in residency. I actually had a corporate dental office come to reach out to me and offered me a position without an interview without even meeting me. I think they had just kind of had a history of recruiting residents to their clinics and that's not necessarily a bad thing. So, I think residency does open some doors. I myself knew that, yeah, the corporate dental world wasn't something I was ready to jump into. It was, yeah, somewhat unfamiliar and a little bit different than the type of offices that I had seen in the past and really enjoyed being a patient at and also shadowing at. So, I was looking for, yeah, more of a, I don't know, family run is the right word, but just sort of a more down to earth simple practice where yeah, there wouldn't be perhaps unrealistic expectations on me when it comes to production.

Dr. Meiszingger: Cause I had heard stories from previous residents who did work with that particular corporate faculty that yeah, they had some unrealistic expectations, let's say. So, I was looking for an associateship that would have a single owner or maybe a couple owners, people that would be down to earth all about their community, their patients. And so, I had a fairly clear vision, I think of what I was looking for, especially given kind of the small town where I grew up in the type of dentists I really looked up to when I was young. So, I ended up in a fairly new practice on the edge of the city of Calgary. I was told by others not to even go for the interview there. They said, you know, no one's gonna want to go to the edge of the city to see their dentist.

Dr. Meiszingger: Like you want to stay downtown. That's where the busy offices are. That's where you're going to make the big money. However, I mean, whether luck would have it, when I went to this small office on the edge of the city, that was right before the recession hit, all the downtown offices lost a lot of patients just because of the workforce leaving. I ended up in an area of the city that was the fastest growing area of the city. Lots of new young families, houses going up all

the time. And I'm really thankful that I didn't listen to some of that advice. I think I listened to a lot of advice, but not all of the advice I got. I think what I learned from that is, you know, location is key when you're looking for an associateship. Yeah. You want to be looking for areas of the city that's growing, not areas that have already grown, if that makes sense.

Dr. Meiszingler: So, I've been there since September 2015, and I haven't left. I've been at the same place. It's a suburban general family dentistry practice. I see a lot of kids. I wouldn't be surprised if 40 to 50% of the patients I see are kids because it is a family full, or a neighborhood full of young families. So, and I think as an associate that's something else you have to be ready for seeing a lot of kids. And I do enjoy that, so that's good. So yeah, I worked there, I started there kind of two or three days a week. And then I also worked at a public dental clinic and I had connections to that public dental clinic through residency. And I was working there one or two days a week at the beginning while I was still kind of building up my patient base at this new office.

Dr. Meiszingler: And then as I got busier at the private office, I kind of scaled back my public work a little bit. I still do go in there, but that was a great way for me to remain busy in the private practice as an associate cause I didn't have an established patient base. It was a new office. So, I started kind of from scratch and still be, you know, involved in community work, giving back to the community. It has been great. I've had amazing flexibility so far with the private practice and the public work. They kind of allow me to go back and forth depending where the greatest need is. So that'd be the long and short of it.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, I'd sum it up by saying that you followed your heart. That was the probably the most important aspect of what attracted you to the particular type of associateship you're in now.

Dr. Meiszingler: Yeah. Fair enough.

Dr. O'Keefe: What does a typical day work look like for you in your private office?

New Speaker: So, I show up, I review the day with the team. My assistant is phenomenal, very detail oriented, has a great eye for the schedule, can remember patients names, can remember the procedures that are needing to be done, you know, that skill set that she has, I think, you know, I'm also really detail oriented, and I think her and I complement each other well. So, we look at the day together and we always have a member of the admin staff present as well from the front desk cause often there's questions that they can help us answer or they can navigate us through the day. So that's a super critical part of the day. And I think the temptation is to jump right into the day, show up five minutes before, drink some coffee and get going.

Dr. Meiszingler: But to be really honest, like those 15 minutes before the day actually begins, they set the tone for the whole day. They help the day to run as smoothly as possible. And I mean even with all of that preparation, and my assistant probably spends 15 minutes before that meeting, creating a summary of the day on a sheet of paper and we have specific things that she does. So, she looks at, you know, the patient we're seeing their outstanding treatment, whether their family members have been booked for treatment, whether their family members have hygiene appointments that need to happen. We have a whole list of things and she just fills out this sheet of paper each morning and hands it to the admin staff at the end. And then the admin staff can look at it and say, okay, we've got to book all of these other people in for treatment as well.

Dr. Meiszingler: And again, not just kind of helps to keep my schedule busy. So that 15-minute meeting, super important. And then, I mean, you just go to work. At the beginning, I had, you know, sometimes an hour, two hours, three hours in my day that weren't booked with patients because to be honest, I was the new kid on the block. It was a new office. They didn't have, like I said before, a huge patient base established for me and I had to really adjust my expectations and be okay with that. And I think it's important to recognize where you are in the spectrum of your career and don't walk into a new associateship expecting the world and being busy, busy, busy all the time. Rather, you know, you can use those hours during the day when you're not seeing patients to shadow the other dentists in the office.

Dr. Meiszingler: I learned a ton from that. In fact, just a couple of days ago I watched an implant get placed with the owner of the office; had a bit of time and that was great. Like what a phenomenal learning opportunity. So, you can really take advantage of those things. You can be doing online learning, you can be doing some reading, you can be making care calls to your patients that you've seen. Maybe the week before and really establishing that rapport. That's something that I've developed a practice of doing as well. And I would say now after being there for four years, I'm, I'm busy. I'm booked up until the end of next month. That just took me kind of sitting there the first couple of years, maybe the first year, year and a half, and being okay with having some of those gaps in my schedule. I actually spoke to the associate who left and provided me with the opportunity at that office and he was regretting leaving.

Dr. Meiszingler: He really was. He was like, I wish I had toughed it out and sat there and been okay with being less busy for that initial stage because now he can see how busy the office is. You gotta, yeah it takes some patience a little bit.

Dr. O'Keefe: It needs more than one sense of the world to really keep going.

Dr. Meiszingler: Exactly. It's a long-term thinking like, yeah, look at the new patient flow coming in project, you know, okay, what is my future holds here? And you've gotta be

realistic if you're sitting, you know, for hours of the day for months on end and things aren't improving, those are dangerous signs. But if you're seeing healthy new patients flow, if you're working with an owner who's willing to share the new patients with you in a fair way, then yeah, there's, there's a future there for you.

Dr. Meiszinger: So, when I, when I first started working in the associateship, I worked three evenings a week and two Saturdays a month because I knew those were busy times. I knew those were times that new patients would want to come in after work or on a weekend. And you know, that wasn't easy. But now I'm down to one evening a week and one Saturday a month and I've been able to kind of taper back and find a more comfortable lifestyle that works for me. But sometimes it does mean you have to sacrifice early on.

Dr. O'Keefe: What I'm picking up on from what you're saying, the whole time, the people element is so important. You've got a great team, it sounds like supporting you. It sounds like you've got a principle or principles in the practice that are very open, provide you with good learning opportunities. You've really, you're playing the long game in terms relationship building.

Dr. Meiszinger: Fair enough for sure. And I'll mention this too because it's something that I've just realized this year, working those three evenings a week and two Saturdays a month to be honest, it got to be a little bit, a little bit much. And you know, when you're working five days a week alternating with six-day weeks, that's not playing the long game. And I realized that, and I've started to scale back. And so now, I mean because I've been with this private practice for a number of years and they see the value that I bring when I approached them about six months ago and said, listen, could I have the odd Wednesday off just to kind of recharge my batteries and make sure that I'm able to do this not just for the next year, the next 10 years, 20 years. They were like, absolutely. Like we'll find someone else to come in and fill in for you, not a problem.

Dr. Meiszinger: And the Wednesdays off in the middle of the week. If you're able to do that. I mean it's great if you're not, I understand, but the odd day off you're in there can make a huge difference.

Dr. O'Keefe: And we often said that it feels like playing hockey when you're off in the middle of the week when everyone has got the head down.

Dr. Meiszinger: It feels good.

Dr. O'Keefe: What do you like best about your associateship position?

Dr. Meiszinger: So I really like being able just to focus on the patient and on good dentistry. So I'm not, I'm not worried about staffing, I'm not worried about the business side

of things. That said, I've got my eyes open and my ears open and I'm learning a lot about the business side of things, which again is another great aspect of being an associate. You can pretend you're not interested in the business of things, but if you're interested in doing your own practice at some point, like what a perfect opportunity to be learning from the successes and failures of whatever office you're in.

Dr. Meiszing: So that's huge bonus as well. And because I have a really great team around me, I'm able to learn from them. I'm able to shadow the other dentist like I said, when he's taking out a complex third molar or placing an implant, he really likes doing surgical stuff. So, I'm able to learn from him as well. But the flexibility I think is number one. Maybe it's just me as a millennial saying that, but it's really important to me to have options and flexibility. You know, to take these Wednesdays off, to work with the public clinic, to go to a course, to travel, to see my family in Ontario. There's so many other things outside of the profession that, you know, I want to explore early on in your career, the time to be exploring those things.

Dr. Meiszing: You want to join, um, different initiatives around the country or in your city community. Now is the time to do that.

Dr. O'Keefe: And from working with you in the CDA taskforce on the future of the profession, you're a millennial that has two eyes, two ears, one mouth, and you put them all to good use. Tobias. have you some bits of advice to give to let's say a senior student who's thinking of starting to look for their first association?

Dr. Meiszing: Sure. So, when I was looking for my associateship, like I mentioned I was in residency, so I was, I had access to a number of mature dentists, my supervisors. And the first thing I did was just approached them and asked them what are some good questions that I should be asking? And it was really helpful because you know, these were dentists who had been in Calgary for some time.

Dr. Meiszing: I think they understood well the culture of the city and they knew good questions to ask. And I have a list of those very specific questions which I won't get into, but I can for them to you some very specific questions. And it was kind of interesting cause when I went into my interviews it was almost as if I was interviewing the office and they weren't interviewing me and I was in some positions where an office would offer me for instance, you know, 30% of collections. And I would say actually, you know, across the city 40% is the standard. And they would look at me and you could just kind of see, you know, their respect kind of rising a bit and be like, okay, this guy's not a push over. He kind of knows what's appropriate and what's not. And I think in asking some of those questions, I actually saved myself perhaps from going into offices that would have taken advantage of me in some way.

- Dr. Meiszinger: And I think those offices are few and far between. But they are out there. So, it's important to go in there with a good set of questions. So that's number one. I also wouldn't jump at the first associateship position you're offered. In some of these cities, if it's, you know, competitive, you might be tempted to just kind of jump at it and dive in. But yeah, really do your due diligence, learn as much as you can about the office before you commit to anything. And I think everyone's a little bit different, but the big thing for me is the culture of the office. So, if you're able to, I don't know, listen in on a new patient exam and shadow a little bit for half a day or something and just kind of hear the types of messages that are being delivered to patients.
- Dr. Meiszinger: You're still in the early stages of kind of figuring out your treatment philosophy, but you should have a general idea of kind of what you're comfortable with and not comfortable with. So, listen in on some exams, shadow a little bit. Get a feel for the culture of the office and that'll really help you to determine if it's a good fit for you as well. Something that I didn't immediately understand but I learned while being in the practice was the importance of, I guess you can call it like staff dynamics or interpersonal dynamics within the office. That was something that I didn't focus on a whole lot cause I almost just assumed that every office would have a well functioning team. That's not always the case. So it's good to ask questions about the staff in the office and ask, you know, how long have the staff been here? What sort of mechanisms are in place to resolve interpersonal conflict?
- Dr. Meiszinger: What sort of things are done amongst the staff to encourage good morale or just an encouraging environment, you know, do you have stuff, meetings, do you go on trips with the staff? These are really good questions to ask. And often, you know, the office manager will be the one who can answer some of those questions. So, it's good to even ask, do you have an office manager? How long have they been in the industry? How long have you been around? And that really helped. I mean, I'll just give you a personal example of no joke. Just yesterday sat down with the manager and another staff member at my office and resolved some interpersonal conflict that was there as a result of something that happened in the past and the manager was phenomenal at negotiating that conversation and just kind of helping us to resolve it and it was resolved very quickly and everything is great.
- Dr. Meiszinger: But these things do happen. You're working in a high-stress environment and it's important to make sure that you've got some mechanisms in place to help resolve any sort of conflicts. Cause when you're working that closely with your fellow staff, you need to be on good working terms with them and create like a positive environment. So those are all kind of big picture things that I would say. At the same time, there's a lot of really specific questions that are important to ask when you walk into a private office. Like I said, I can give you that list of

questions at another time and I'm sure there's lots of lists out there, but that's the big picture stuff.

Dr. O'Keefe: That's what we're trying to do with this resource is to provide people who are about to embark on a career decision with a set of questions and to give them some insights as to what the answers maybe ought to be to the questions once they ask them of others and themselves too. Tobias, it sounds like you're having a very positive experience in your associateship. Any final word of wisdom for somebody thinking just coming out of dental school?

Dr. Meiszingler: I may have said it before but think it's just important to recognize where you're at in the process. I've talked to a new Grad recently, a friend of mine who just graduated, and you know there's sometimes super high expectations for yourself for where you should be. You know, you don't want to walk into a private practice feeling insecure or not confident, but the reality is, I mean, you are going to feel insecure. You are gonna feel like you lack confidence and that's totally normal. There's still days I lack confidence walking into the private office. I mean, it is what it is and it's important to just be humble. And as you walk into your office, be ready to learn from the owner, from the other staff members.

Dr. Meiszingler: I mean the number one thing, the best way I learned how to interact with kids was from an assistant who had just a phenomenal way of talking to the kids. And I still use that same approach now and it's brought me lots of success with children. And I mean, so there's a ton left to learn. Just because you finished dental school doesn't mean you know everything, and a lot of things change in the private office. So, it's just important to be ready to continue the learning process. Look for learning opportunities. I mean, don't, don't be too hard on yourself. I think like in dental school, the patients you see are very forgiving. They expect to be in the chair for three hours. Different story in a private office. And you know, early on I still found patients to be very gracious when the appointments did go unexpectedly longer. And it still happens now from time to time. You just have to slowly work yourself up to kind of at the pace you want to work, doing the procedures you want to work and just take your time and enjoy the ride.

Dr. O'Keefe: Focus on the learning the rest will take care of itself.

Dr. Meiszingler: Yeah, there's, there's a really good saying that I heard at a course recently and it was don't chase the dollar, let the dollar chase you. So, there's a lot of offices where they are chasing the dollar. They're looking for every nickel and dime they can get out of a patient and they'll bill for every little thing. Right. Early on, I really learned the value of those care calls. That's another thing you can do as an associate. If you have some spare time in your schedule and you took out a tooth on someone the day before, give them a call, see how they're doing.

- Dr. Meiszingler: That could be the number one way to fill your schedule in the future as well. I remember I one time made, so I made a call to a patient that I'd taken a tooth, very quick conversation. 15, 20 seconds. Hi, how are you? How are you doing? Doing well. That's great to hear. All the best. They came back the next day and they're like, I had other friends in the room when you made that call. And when I hung up and I told them that was my dentist calling, they were shocked. Like they had no idea that a dentist would ever do that. And so that 15 second phone call turned into their friends coming in to see me as well. And it's just, it's the simple things, right? And it's, it's easy if you keep it that way.
- Dr. O'Keefe: So, thank you so much for spending part of your valuable Wednesday battery recharging here and sharing your wisdom Tobias, I really enjoyed this conversation.
- Dr. Meiszingler: Thank you very much for having me.