

Dr. Deb Szabo – on Her Journey Choosing a Dental Specialty Program in Endodontics

- Dr. O'Keefe: I'm delighted to welcome today Dr. Deb Szabo who's an endodontist in Vancouver, and she's going to talk to us about her journey towards choosing a specialty program and going through the specialty program. She'll share some advice for our young colleagues who are thinking of following her. Deb, would you give us the highlights of your professional career to date, please?
- Dr. Szabo: Well, I particularly enjoyed practicing GP practice prior to going into a specialty program. I found that it really did open my eyes to the different aspects of dentistry, what's involved, not only on a clinical basis but also on a business basis. And it allowed me to focus in on the aspects and elements of dentistry that I truly enjoy, which eventually ended up being endodontics. So the highlight now I could say is that I get to go to work every day and do what I love to do and I get excited in the morning to go to work.
- Dr. O'Keefe: Now you practiced as a GP for a fair number of years. You didn't do the straight out of dental school, residency and into a specialty program.
- Dr. Szabo: That's right. I did practice for 12 years. Right after actually I did an AEGD in University of Michigan, so I even did a little bit more education after my DDS. Yeah, I definitely, I mean I wouldn't say you have to do 12 years of GP practice before you decide what to do as a specialist, but definitely putting in some time, a few years, to get a sense of what it's like to practice in general dentistry, it definitely gives a lot of insight into all aspects of the profession.
- Dr. O'Keefe: So, what attracted you to be common endodontist and was that your first love in terms of a potential specialty?
- Dr. Szabo: It was definitely not my first love. I think when I finished dental school it was probably on the lower end of the things that I enjoyed doing. But that's I think why going into GP practice was so helpful because I got a better sense as to what we're doing, especially when we're treating numerous patients, as we're seeing them age get older and we're actually getting to see their needs and their desires. I realized that esthetics wasn't really what I was focused on in my career. I really enjoyed the concept of disease, pain, infection and trying to manage that with patients. And I felt that endodontics definitely did provide me with that stimulation and just the puzzles that I like to engage in in endodontics, because it can be quite fun.
- Dr. O'Keefe: A number of other specialist colleagues have told me that, you know, that they wanted to do we'll just say prosth or pedo or something like that when they started, but then they had a different view once they had a few years under their belt.

- Dr. Szabo: Well, that's right. That's exactly what happened to me. I had actually applied to a prosthodontic program and a pedodontic program straight out of school. I'm glad that my life circumstances did not allow me to pursue those specialties because I ended up in general practice and it was only the time there that I did finally realize my true passion, if you want to call it, cause endodontics is very far removed from pedo and prosth. So, I would have never imagined that that would have been the direction I would have taken straight out of school.
- Dr. O'Keefe: Now you took your program at UBC. Did you apply to a ton of places or did you really focus on that program?
- Dr. Szabo: I did not apply to any other places other than UBC other than enquired about other programs. I wouldn't say that that's generally the best way to do it. But for me, at this point in my life I had three children, a working husband who actually had an established practice and we were also considering a move out West for lifestyle reasons. So, for a lot of reasons, not just endodontics, but we decided that the move to BC would be in our best interests. So, I had a lot more than just myself to think about. So, I did put all my eggs in that one basket. But it worked out well., so no regrets.
- Dr. O'Keefe: A number of other colleagues have told me that family considerations are very important when you're actually choosing a place to go for specialty, so you've corroborated that.
- Dr. Szabo: It is, it is. Absolutely.
- Dr. O'Keefe: What's a typical week like for a resident in the endo program that you attended, and does it change over the three years?
- Dr. Szabo: It does change. It is dynamic. I guess it generally starts at a bit more didactic and as you move through the program it becomes more and more clinical. What I loved about the program though is that it still, everyone there is a dentist so everyone has generally had some degree of experience in dentistry and so it's quite clinic heavy. So that's fun because that's what you're used to doing on a day to day basis in practice. And intermingled with your clinic sessions are seminars, which are very different from dental school in that it's a smaller group. We're all sitting around a table generally not just per year, you might have first and second years together, first, second and third years together, so everyone is collaborating and offering their experience and education. So it's definitely giving it much, just a very personal aspect to the program and just to the seminar. So it's not, it's a bit different than just having a lecture in a seated classroom environment.

Dr. O'Keefe:

What did you like best about your training?

Dr. Szabo:

Oh, I just loved going back to school and talking about something that I enjoyed so much with others who enjoyed it just as much as I did. To be able to discuss endodontics with people who are just as eager to do the same things that I was interested in doing and going back to that educational environment was just, there was never a dull moment. And for me that was quite exciting.

Dr. O'Keefe:

Intellectual stimulation. Right?

Dr. Szabo:

Pretty much. Yes, yes.

Dr. O'Keefe:

Like-minded people with a passion for excellence.

Dr. Szabo:

Exactly.

Dr. O'Keefe:

Okay. Let's work towards rounding this off. Have you some pearls of advice for younger colleagues of ours who may be thinking about following the path that you took?

Dr. Szabo:

I would definitely say give general practice a chance, at least for a little bit, just so you really do get an idea and a grasp on what's out there. And do your research. You know, I would visit different programs. Every program is unique. Talk to residents. Talk to, if you're a mom, talk to a mom who might be going through similar things. If you're a single guy looking for a different lifestyle, then go talk to and find that personality as well. But I just think doing your research and really getting some experience is critical because I think everyone's probably quite smart when they finish dental school, but there's something to be said about wisdom. So, I would say try and get some of that under your belt and just go with what really makes you happy. Because ultimately that's what you want to do when you go to work is have a good time doing it.

Dr. O'Keefe:

Now I'm going to test your memory here and maybe some the highlights of your actual process for applying. Do you remember who you got to give letters of reference and would you have any advice to me or anybody about who to line up as really good letters of reference?

Dr. Szabo:

Oh, it's funny you ask cause I actually, the people who wrote my reference letters were throughout my career. So, one was I mentioned my AEGD, so right out of dental school one of the guys I worked with, he did, he actually laughed when he wrote my reference cause he said I would have never thought that you would've gone into endo cause this was quite a bit, quite a few years after there. Another reference was a colleague that I had met during my GP practice career. And the final one was one of the guys I had worked with in practice. So

he was my, I associated for him. So I think they all got a good grasp on who I was as both a clinician and a student. And once again, I mean that just took time in

getting to know people so that the references that they wrote were legitimate reflections on my personality and character.

Dr. O'Keefe: I've been told by a number of other equivalent colleagues, like yourself, that the interview is an important aspect of getting chosen for specialty school and it's so important to communicate a passion for the specialty and why you really want to come to that particular school. You're not disagreeing with me, I see, when I put those ideas forward. Had you any particular methods of preparing yourself for that interview or did you just radiate that passion?

Dr. Szabo: My interview was Friday and I'd worked with Thursday before. I wouldn't say that I was unprepared in that I didn't know what I was going getting into, but I didn't have any really rehearsed answers. Because as you said, it was not difficult to see that this was something I legitimately wanted to do. There would be only honesty in that aspect and I'd be answering questions. And absolutely, it's not difficult to apply to a program when it shows that that's exactly what you want to do with your time and life. So yeah, I think being yourself and showing your passion with a little bit of humility, those are definitely good things to bring to an interview process and it just makes the whole process that much more enjoyable.

Dr. O'Keefe: Any final word of advice for people?

Dr. Szabo: we spoke a few times over about following your passion, because it does make your day to day that much more exciting. As I said, I now get up in the morning and I'm really excited to go to work. I really do enjoy it. And, just even make sure that you, if you do want to go back to school, that school is something you enjoy. Because it is, it is work, it is hard work. But once again, if it's something that you enjoy and you're amongst people who are thinking along the same wavelength as you are. It's a really great environment to be in. So just, yeah, make sure you do all the research and follow what you think is really gonna make you happy at the end of the day. Because ultimately, you know, it sounds a little cheesy, but ultimately that's what really gets us ticking at the end of the day so, there you go.

Dr. O'Keefe: Dr. Deb Szabo, I want to thank you very much for this. It's interesting how a former program director of your program told me I had to speak to you if I wanted to get, you know, a really good, honest insight about going through an endo specialty program. And I think that advice was good from him. Thanks again.

Dr. Szabo: You're so very welcome.

