“What is the best I can do for my patients?” Harvey Levy’s answer to this question has brought together elements as diverse as sign language, the operating room, and the martial arts. Fortunately for the clinical offices adjacent to his, Dr. Levy’s answer did not include drumming, which he seriously considered as his career prior to attending Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in 1970. “But I’ve not given up on drumming up business,” he clarifies, illustrating his penchant for puns and jokes.

FIVE DEFINING EXPERIENCES
Dr. Harvey Levy’s focus as a general dentist was defined by five learning experiences. The first began in 1974 immediately after his graduation from Tufts, during a general practice residency program at the Eastman Dental Center in Rochester, New York. In the clinic he learned to treat handicapped and deaf patients, and quickly realized that these patients were often unable to get proper care in most conventional dental offices.

In 1975 he entered a second-year residency program at The Genesee Hospital in Rochester. Wishing to do his best for patients who couldn’t be treated in an office due to behavior management problems or fear of the dentist, he learned to work in the operating room alongside physicians. He continued learning these skills in clinics and operating rooms in Edinburgh, Scotland and London, England. Lesson learned: “Treating a dental patient who is asleep is easy, efficient, and always successful. The patient suffers no pain and no unpleasant memories.” Time has borne out this insight: more than 1,500 O.R. cases later, all of his dental surgeries were completed successfully.
The third learning experience that professionally defined Dr. Levy happened from 1976-79 in Lansing, Michigan, during a practice associateship. He was working in a dental office and in three different hospitals, treating patients who were too uncooperative to be helped in an office setting such as infants, victims of Alzheimer’s, and mentally challenged and autistic patients. It was at the dental office that he realized the crucial importance of the staff to the comfort of the patients and the growth of the practice. “Unless patients are well treated by the front desk team, they won’t even make it into the treatment rooms. Once there, it’s the hygienists who have the power to either captivate the patients or to scare them away. The assistants enhance the patient’s impression, positive or negative, of the dentist’s competence. Finally, the clerical support team ensures that everyone works together smoothly and that we all get paid. The success of a practice depends on the entire staff’s rapport with and concern for our patients,” he concluded.

The fourth experience was a tenure as a full-time instructor of the general practice residency at the Hospital University of Pennsylvania, from 1979-80. His contract specified that half of his time be spent treating medically compromised patients, which expanded his ability to treat patients commonly deprived of dental care. The second half was designated to teaching dental residents and dental students. It was then that Dr. Levy realized that he absolutely loves to teach. This passion has led him to conduct at least a dozen seminars and workshops for dentists every year all over the country, and to mentor young dentists.

Dr. Levy’s fifth defining learning experience began when he was a teenager training in karate, though it was only a decade ago that he found a fascinating practical link between the martial arts and dentistry. Sensei Levy now holds a third-degree black belt in Tang Soo Do karate, a third-degree black belt in Ryu Kyu Kempo Okinawan karate, and is Senior Instructor in Combat Hapkido. He is also belted in Brazilian Gracie Jiu Jitsu, and continues to train in a dojo several days a week. He was inducted into the US Martial Arts Black Belt Hall of Fame in 2010 and 2012.

A SPECIAL NEEDS OFFICE
In 1980 Dr. Levy chose to live in Frederick, attracted by the Maryland School for the Deaf and by Frederick Memorial Hospital. He placed his first shingle on the door of a 100 square-foot treatment room, and started to teach radiology to dental assistants at Frederick Community College. In 1987 when the radiology program was terminated he hired Deborah Mason-Rooney as his office manager, and focused his energies on growing the practice. And indeed it grew. In the past 26 years, Mrs. Mason-
Rooney has seen his office expand from a 1,500 to a 4,000 square-foot space. But one thing has remained constant since 1980, which is what happens every Tuesday from 8 a.m.-1 p.m.

Only special needs patients are scheduled for Tuesday mornings. Many have to be sedated and rolled into the office on wheelchairs or gurneys by their caretakers. They are mentally challenged, autistic, morbidly obese, or victims of Alzheimer’s disease. Some don’t understand what is happening, and scream in fear. The clinical staff and dentists know how to calm them, while gently and effectively restraining their movements to enable comprehensive treatment.

Since 2005 Dr. Harvey Levy and his three associates, Dr. David M. Somerville, Dr. Niraj D. Patel and Dr. Sunanda Bhushan, have donated their time to the February “Give Kids a Smile” program, where they treat 50 indigent children in the office’s treatment rooms. Each of the four dentists also accepts two pro bono cases annually from the Donated Dental Services program (Maryland Foundation for the Handicapped) and take part in the Religious Coalition program for indigents.

In honor of his work with handicapped patients, Dr. Levy was selected to be Olympic Torch runner #1 in the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. “I did get my 15 minutes of fame, with my family running alongside me. The next morning we were invited to the White House and were greeted by the President,” he said.

Laughter can often be heard in the office, open 60 hours per week, reflecting the philosophy of the entire staff – “the best we can do for our patients...including evenings and Saturdays.”

The office is blessed with a superb staff consisting of six dental assistants, nine dental hygienists, and seven front desk coordinators. Specialists (insurance, billing/collections, and instructional technology) complete the team. All are gently guided by Deborah Mason-Rooney, office manager extraordinaire, enabling the four doctors to focus on patient care. With an office of this size it is easy for staff to swap hours with each other when necessary. Thus, on any given day it’s very likely that everyone will be in a good mood!

Students and interns who train at the office include dental assistants, hygienists, and dentists. They attend Hagerstown Community College, Kaplan College, Howard University, and the University of Maryland. Dr. Levy also mentors participants from his courses, who visit the office or the O.R. with him.

Once a week, the staff enjoys a “lunch and learn,” in-house continuing education. Training topics can be classes (e.g., sign language, Spanish, CPR, using computers effectively) or presentations by vendors. The staff suggests topics to be scheduled at these meetings, and their input is crucial to the decisions made for the practice. For example, the entire staff was on-board with the digital x-ray system chosen, and with the decision to go paperless, implemented in 2011.

Staff are encouraged to pursue many choices of off-site continuing education in areas of their interest, subsidized by the practice. Certain courses – such as sign language, Spanish, infection control, new hygiene techniques, and computer skills – are completely sponsored by the practice.
MANY CHOICES FOR PATIENTS

In the office the dentists perform a vast array of procedures that include conventional and cosmetic restorations, periodontal therapy, space maintenance, crowns, bridges, removable partial and full dentures, extractions, removal of impacted wisdom teeth, implants (in conjunction with an oral surgeon or periodontist), biopsies, bleaching, and root canals. The hygienists perform professional prophylaxis cleanings, scalings, root planing, bleaching, sealants, polishing, and oral hygiene instruction.

When patients enter a treatment room they see a comfortable chair and a television screen. Many of the props usually associated with dental treatments are hidden from view. Intra-oral cameras, digital X-ray and laughing gas equipment are available in all rooms, but are stored inside cabinets. Patients have the choice to watch cable TV, videos ranging from Barney to Bruce Lee, or educational videos about dental procedures. If they’re so inclined they can also listen to Dr. Levy’s endless stream of jokes, enjoy Dr. Somerville’s stories, be soothed by Dr. Patel’s gentle touch, or hear Dr. Bhushan’s soft calming voice while a music tape plays in the background.

To ensure that every patient is comfortable with all dental work to be performed, Dr. Levy, Dr. Somerville, Dr. Patel and Dr. Bhushan consult with their patients after the initial examination. Their concern for doing the best they can do for the patients invariably involves offering a choice of treatment plans.

The doctors often consult with and refer to each other for procedures that reflect their clinical strengths and skills.

“We educate and advise, but never insist,” said Dr. Levy. “We always use the triad of treatment presentations: Here are the facts (possible treatment plans). Here is my professional opinion about which one is best for you. Now you do what seems right to you.” Each patient is treated with friendliness, compassion, respect, sensitivity, and caring.

Anxiolysis (conscious sedation) in the form of nitrous oxide and oral sedation (Valium, Halcion and other pills) is available at the office. However, some patients cannot physically endure long hours in a dental chair, or are too anxious for office treatment. Young children can be frightened by basic dental procedures, as can patients with Alzheimer’s, the mentally challenged, or patients who just suffer from situational anxiety. In these cases, one of the treatment plans offered to patients is for the doctor to perform all the dental work in a single visit, in a hospital operating room.

GENERAL DENTISTRY IN THE OPERATING ROOM

“Dental procedures are four times faster in the hospital,” said Dr. Levy, “where it is less stressful on both the patient and the dentist.” Three people can work on the patient at one time – the dentist, the hygienist, and the assistant. Dr. Levy’s reputation in the O.R. brings him referrals from a 100 mile radius, some of whom sleep...
at a hotel close to the hospital on the eve of the procedure.

In Dr. Levy’s experience, “When a patient cannot be helped in an office setting, he or she can successfully be treated in the O.R. under general anesthesia. Every patient can receive the care they desire or need when they are put to sleep for a few hours. They get a clean, fresh start, without the possible psychological harm of being restrained or overmedicated.

Most of the patients the doctors treat in the O.R. require same-day surgery. The patient can usually check out of the hospital 60-90 minutes after exiting the O.R. The follow-up visit in the dental office is usually 1-2 weeks later. During this courtesy visit the patient, the family, and/or the caregiver are also taught proper techniques for preventive oral hygiene.

The doctors often evaluate and treat inpatients. Dr. Levy clarified, “several times a month we are called to the hospital to see a patient suffering from bacteremia or septicemia. The patient has already been seen by multiple physicians, to no avail. Abscesses in the mouth manifest elsewhere in the body, but many physicians will only look through the mouth, not at it, thereby missing the source of the medical problems. By removing oral infections that were seeding the rest of the body, our dental practice has been able to save dozens of lives over the years.” For this, in part, Dr. Levy was honored in 2002 with Frederick Memorial Hospital’s coveted Good Samaritan Award.

The doctors and clinical staff also perform limited procedures in patients’ homes, nursing homes, and other institutions.

MARTIAL ARTS AND EXODONTIA

Many procedures in the O.R. involve extractions. After extracting several dozen teeth each week, Dr. Levy found that he often experienced wrist fatigue and physical exhaustion. One night during karate training he had an “aha” moment, realizing that he could move far more efficiently in the O.R. if he applied the biomechanical principles of his martial arts practice to his dental extractions.

In short, he developed a simple technique whereby he uses his hips, not his hands, to provide the force required to pull a tooth. He explained, “For fifty years my martial arts grandmasters trained me to use the larger muscles to do the work that is best performed by the larger muscles, and to use the smaller muscles to do work that is best performed by the smaller muscles. That makes sense, because the larger muscles generate power, and the smaller muscles direct it.”

The result: “I have extracted as many as 80 teeth in one day in the O.R. with no hint of physical exhaustion or of manual or wrist fatigue. I have extracted hundreds of teeth before fracturing a single root. I have 75% fewer fractures with this technique than I used to have, which is kinder to the patient and more efficient and painless for me.”
When teaching dentists, Dr. Levy shows them videos of himself applying the biomechanical technique in the O.R. The audience laughs when they see him doing a little dance reminiscent of a young Elvis. They’re still chuckling when they watch him place the first extracted tooth on a towel. Then, about thirty seconds later, he adds a second tooth. And a third. The teeth continue to come out at an average rate of one per minute. None of the teeth have broken roots. The audience’s reaction shifts to awe and curiosity.

In his participation courses about this new technique, usually titled “Biomechanics in Exodontia,” he uses blocks of wood, screws and screwdrivers to allow the audience to experiment with the biomechanical principles that he explains. Dentists who have started using this technique have been reporting excellent results. One female dentist from St. Louis, Missouri, who suffers from arthritis, even resumed extracting teeth after taking Dr. Levy’s course.

**PASSING IT FORWARD**

Dr. Levy’s concern for education and his love of teaching have spanned several decades. While teaching at the Hospital University of Pennsylvania in 1979, he developed a protocol to teach CPR to blind and deaf people. After relocating to Maryland he became an instructor-trainer for the American Heart Association (AHA). The protocols he developed ultimately led to national adoption, by the AHA, of new standards and guidelines that enable deaf or blind people to pass the CPR provider test, despite the fact that they are unable to literally see the chest rise or hear breath sounds.

As the President and then Executive Director of the Maryland Academy of General Dentistry for 14 years (1989-2003), Dr. Levy has promoted continuing education for dentists seeking training in special patient care. He has developed and frequently teaches such courses at many state and national dental meetings.

He concludes, “I continue to strive to do the best I can do for our patients, as does every single person in the dental practice. At this point in my career there are several things that bring me tremendous joy. One is teaching what I’ve learned to younger dentists, and mentoring them. Another is treating the children (and now the grandchildren!) of formerly apprehensive children who I have treated in the O.R. since 1980. Together, we partner to ensure that the younger generation is not a victim of the cycle of dental neglect that requires urgent dental care in a hospital setting.”

If you would like to start treating frightened infants, wiggling children, Alzheimer’s patients, elderly people in their 80s or 90s, autistic and mentally challenged patients, medically compromised patients (with cardiac, kidney, bleeding or other disorders), or simply people with dental phobias, you may want to consider attending one of Dr. Levy’s courses about special patient care or hospital dentistry. For more information please call the Frederick office at (301) 663-8300, e-mail him at drhlevy@gmail.com, or visit DrHLevy.Assoc.com.

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Sunanda Bhushan, D.M.D., M.D.S., graduated from Boston University Goldman School of Dental Medicine in 2005. She has been an associate of Dr. Levy’s since 2008. Before moving to the U.S. with her husband, Suresh, in 2001, she completed a postgraduate degree in Prosthodontics at Nair Hospital and Dental College, Mumbai, India. She lives in Boyds, MD and has two young sons, Sachet and Samarth, in elementary school. Besides being a busy mom and dentist, she finds time for sketching, painting and singing.

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Clerical Team and Dr. Bhushan, clockwise from left: Teresa McPherson, Alleda Petto, Samantha Krauss, Carol Skeens, Ryn Miller, Lena Rotenberg, Abbey Mason, Dr. Bhushan, and Chenita Wattay. Missing: Samantha Crowder.
Sensei Levy’s family playfully demonstrates affection while training during a camping trip. Missing: Granddaughters Shuli and Bella Friedman, still too young to train.

Dr. Harvey Levy served as the President (1989-91) and then as the Executive Director (1992-2003) of the Maryland Academy of General Dentistry. He has also been a delegate to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) annual meetings twenty times, representing Maryland general dentists at the national level.

He holds eight fellowships: AGD (1983), Academy of Dentistry International (1988), American Association of Hospital Dentists (1989), American Society for Geriatric Dentistry (1991), Academy of Dentistry for the Handicapped (1992), American Association of Integrative Medicine (2001), American College of Forensic Examiners Institute (2006), and Dental Organization for Conscious Sedation (2008). He received his Mastership in 1991 into the AGD. He earned four diplomate certificates, including the Special Care Dentistry Association (2004). To date he is the only dentist in the USA to have received three AGD’s Lifelong Learning and Service Recognition Awards (2006, 2010 and 2012). Other honors that Dr. Levy is especially proud of, beyond the ones mentioned in the body of this article, include Maryland’s Doctor of the Year Award (Governor’s Commission on Employment of the Handicapped (1983), AGD’s Humanitarian of the Year Award (1986), and the ADA’s Access to Care Award (2002).

He lives in Keedysville, MD with his wife Lena, who is also the instructional technology coordinator for the practice. Together, they enjoy spending time with daughter Ariel, plus daughter Becca, son-in law Josh, and their children.