

The High Price of Gold



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Dentists are frequently called cheap, and they simultaneously hold their wallets tight for fear they will be ripped off because some people think we make too much money. I often wonder if dental supplies are expensive because the companies know dental fees are high, or are dental fees high because supplies are so expensive. Most people will tell you not to worry too much because supplies are a small fraction of your overhead. While most people in dentistry make a comfortable living, this story will feed your inner skeptic.

Recently, my dental assistant Heather received a call from someone at a metal refining company. They offered to come by our office and pick up the scrap metal (old crowns, bridges, etc.) and pay us cash on the spot. Heather thought this sounded good and went ahead and scheduled the appointment. When she told me about this I asked the most obvious question, “Heather, how will this person determine exactly what is in our jar of crowns without melting the metal?”

Some time had passed and we forgot about the visit from the scrap dealer. In fact, Heather had every intention of canceling the visit after our conversation. One day the gentleman from this company arrived and Heather asked me if we could just “see” what he had to say and that she would tell him “no” if the deal didn’t seem fair.

The gentleman was pleasant as he explained that the crowns would be sorted by color – gold in one pile, everything else in a second pile. Then he would weigh the two piles, plug them into his special formula and have cash available to pay her on the spot. When she inquired about melting the metal he explained that this process was more convenient for us because he comes right to the office, he can answer our questions on the spot and we don’t have to be bothered with mailing our scrap and waiting for payment. This seemed reasonable in today’s “have-it-now” society, but I was still skeptical.

While he was sorting our metal, I called one of our dental labs and asked for advice. Quite frankly, I should have thought of this earlier, as the dental labs know more about metal than we do. After a few minutes on the telephone, I had the lab costs for high noble and semi precious alloy. When Heather came into my office with the scrap report, we plugged the weights into these prices and came up with a number. Of course we knew this was a very rough estimate, and it would be high since there were many impurities to remove. The scrap man was prepared to haul our metal away for \$1,500 cash. This did not feel right from the beginning, so my assistant politely declined his offer.

My friend at the lab had given me a contact over at Heraeus Kulzer – a very well known dental company that processes scrap metal. In fact *Dentaltown* published a corporate profile on this company last September. Eureka! Why didn’t I think of them? After all, they built their company reputation in the world of precious metals in both dental and industrial applications.

I contacted Heraeus Kulzer, and sent my scrap to be evaluated. They melt the metal down and separate the individual components, multiply the weight of these purified (by the current market price of course). They said they’d send a check when the process was complete. Approximately three weeks later we received a check for \$3,116. Sometimes a healthy dose of skepticism is appropriate. ■