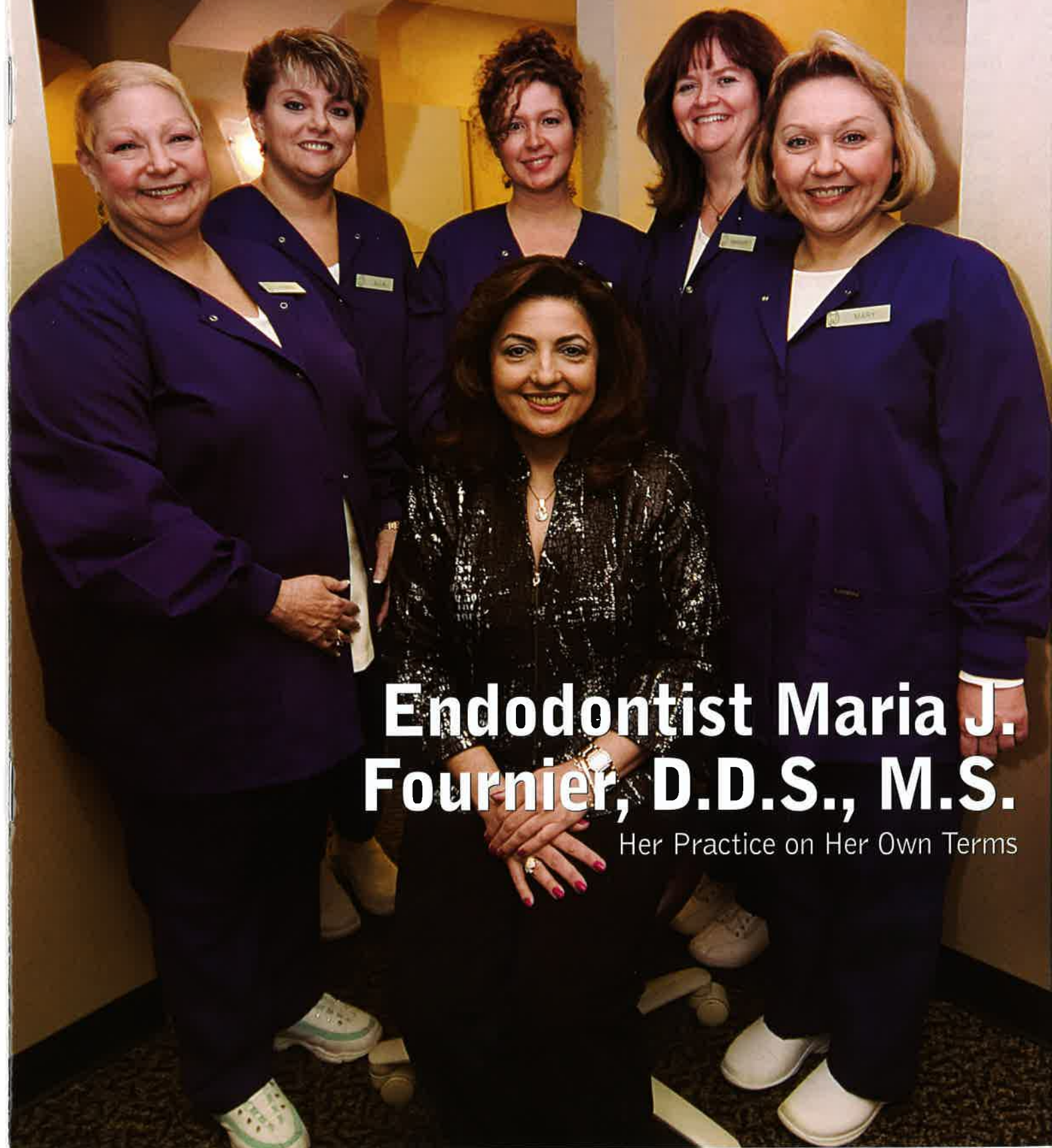


DOCTOR *of* DENTISTRY

A BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE FOR DENTISTS



Endodontist Maria J. Fournier, D.D.S., M.S.

Her Practice on Her Own Terms

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By Margo W. R. Steiner

Whoever wrote the adage “If you want something done, ask a busy person to do it” must have had more than a passing acquaintance with Arlington Heights endodontist Dr. Maria Fournier. The specialist operates a successful five-person practice Monday through Friday (with some Saturdays), serves as President of the Illinois Association of Endodontists, is an active lobbyist for the Illinois State Dental Society, is a committed participant in the society’s “Bridge to a Healthy Smile” campaign and brings a passion to her work that has won her a large and loyal following.

To understand the kind of dental professional Maria Fournier has become — one with a passion for work, an affinity for making a difference in all that she does and a deep connection to and compassion for people — one has only to look to her tight-knit Greek family. The daughter of prominent Chicago ophthalmologist Dr. John H. Fournier, and the granddaughter of the late Chicago general surgeon Dr. Harry J. Fournier, Dr. Fournier knew from childhood that medicine would most likely be in her future.

“I first knew I wanted to be a dentist in eighth grade,” she says. “I

Dr. Fournier is surrounded by her dedicated team (from left) Aleeda Steinberg, receptionist; Alla Kogelman, chairside assistant; Chrissy Smith, chairside assistant; Maggie Janak, receptionist; Mary Sandford, chairside assistant



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Maria with her family, (from the left) her mother, Kathy Fournier; ophthalmologist Dr. John H. Fournier; sister-in-law Koula Fournier; brother Bob Fournier; on her lap, her precious 2½-year-old-niece, Vasiliki Fournier

had always loved arts and crafts and was good in science, but it was my eighth grade art teacher who actually inspired me and showed me how I could combine the two. She said that dentists have to be good at art because of the creative aspect of their work and it was then that I realized I could combine the two things I was best at into a profession.”

That she has done, and in doing so, has achieved success on many different levels.

Asked about her passions, Dr. Fournier is quick to reply: “My work and my family — and chocolate!” She admits that family has the slight edge. “I believe so much in family,” she says, and freely acknowledges the emphasis Greeks place on both family and education. Perhaps it’s small wonder, then, that she chose endodontics as her specialty, the word coming as it does from the Greek roots *endon*, meaning “within,” and *odont*, meaning “tooth.”

Dr. Fournier’s path to her current career began at the University of Illinois – Chicago, where she completed her undergraduate degree with departmental distinction. She continued her studies at Loyola University School of Dentistry, where she received her D.D.S. with several honors. “Once I was in dental school,” she says, “I decided that I wanted to continue with a specialty. I knew that once I was out and making a living, I wasn’t likely to return, so I went straight through.” She entered Northwestern University for a specialty research-oriented program, a master’s degree and her endodontic training. Upon completion of her two-year residency, Dr. Fournier was appointed clinical assistant professor in its endodontic clinic.

Why endodontics? “Out of all the specialties,” she explains, “it was the one that appealed to me most. It’s probably because I’m a perfectionist,” she laughs, “and we endodontists tend to bicker

over something as small as a millimeter to determine success or failure!”

In everything she undertakes, Dr. Fournier enjoys taking on challenges — and resolving them. Not coincidentally, she’s had several in her career, the first occurring shortly after she finished her studies.

The young endodontist fully expected to own her own practice one day. “I certainly wasn’t afraid to own my own business,” she says, “since I was brought up in a family environment of business owners.” What she never anticipated, however, was achieving that goal at the age of 27. No one, she relates, was more surprised than she when eight months after affiliating herself with a practice, the practice’s owner — a young dentist of 43 — died unexpectedly of a heart attack.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Fournier was completely unprepared for the circumstances in which she suddenly found herself. Although practice ownership was her ultimate goal, now wasn’t the opportune time. “I wanted

Dr. Fournier is making access to start root canal therapy on tooth No. 14 on her patient, Tina Nerad



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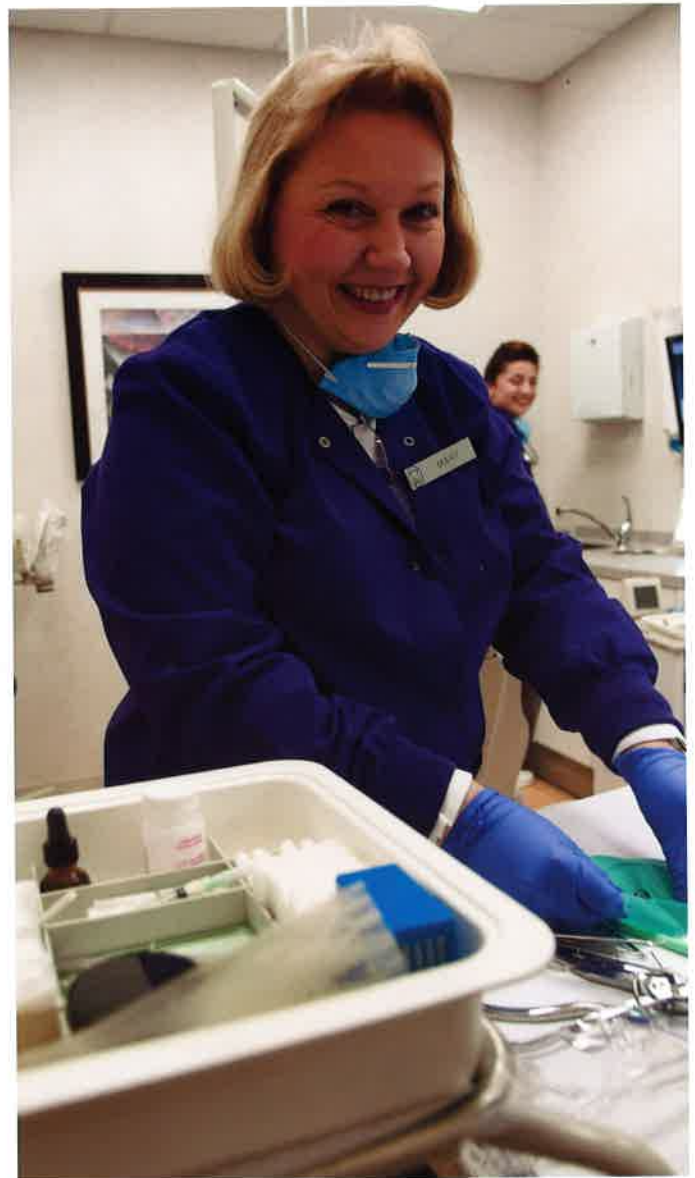
Maggie Janak and Chrissy Smith

to be a kid for one more year and then get serious," she remembers, thinking of the day her associate was rushed to the hospital. Upon his death the following day, the young endodontist was thrust into a world of decisions, responsibility and adult seriousness.

At the time of her associate's death, he and she were the practice's only full-time endodontists. "We had a part-time associate," she explains, "but he was beginning to transition into retirement and had no interest in full-time employment."

Weighing her options, the ever-optimistic Dr. Fournier decided to seize the opportunity presented her. "By my first anniversary as an endodontist," she laughs, "I found myself the owner of my own practice." The transition wasn't without pitfalls, however. "Because there was essentially no goodwill and I wasn't able to purchase the practice's patient list," she explains, "it was considered a distress sale; I was basically buying only the equipment." If I was ever going to take a risk, she remembers thinking, this is the time to do it.

Three things sustained her in those early years — and continue to sustain her today: family, her staff and the community. "I was always told that in business one needs a good lawyer and a good



Assistant Mary Sandford has been with Dr. Fournier for 18 years.

accountant. When I acquired the business, my brother was in law school. He was an enormous help to me then, and still is." The practice's staff remained with her, and the referring dentists continued to support her.

Dr. Fournier is quick to acknowledge the role her staff has played in the practice's success. "I thank God every day for my staff," she says. All of the women in the practice have been together a long time and have seen Dr. Fournier through many of the triumphs and tribulations of a growing practice. "One of my chairside assistants, Mary Sandford, has been with me 18 years and Aleeda Steinberg and Margaret Janak, who answer the phone and deal with patient questions, have been with the practice for 12. Frankly, I don't know what I'd do without my remarkable staff. They help me tremendously, day in and day out," she acknowledges.

Dr. Fournier's second challenge presented itself 12 years later, when the building she was in was torn down, necessitating a move.

Moving into a space of her own across the street was unfortunately not as simple as she had hoped and it wasn't until she removed the so-called "middle men" from the picture and took matters into her

own hands that she was able to get the space on her terms.

"I was always delivering pizza and donuts to the contractors and workmen," she remembers, but the rapport she established paid off in the end. There were enormous highs and some disappointing lows during the building process, she notes, "but the community was so very supportive. When we finally opened, nearly 200 people came to our open house."

Dr. Fournier repays the trust placed in her by the community through exceptional service to her patients and to the dental profession.

"I treat each patient as an individual and work very hard to make each experience a pain free and comfortable one for them," she explains. "As an endodontist, I'm excited when I find an extra canal, solve a difficult diagnosis or relieve someone of pain." Eighteen years into her career, she confesses she still gets a thrill when she looks at a final radiograph that shows all the canals filled to their appropriate lengths. "Who says root canals are boring?" she's been heard to say.

Dr. Fournier emphasizes, however, that making a proper diagnosis is the most important part of her work. "It's important," she says, "to establish good habits that become routine so that even during a busy, stressful day no steps are skipped." Among her other basic tenets are the following: Don't do any procedure unless you are sure it is the cause of the patient's symptoms. Always ask the patient what the problem is, and don't assume the obvious. She's quick to acknowledge tools and technology — things like the apex locator, loops, microscopes, ultrasonics, digital radiographs and electric hand pieces — that help her "accomplish things we couldn't do before."

One of her greatest rewards is treating dental phobics and allaying not only their immediate fears, but also, hopefully, their future concerns about dental procedures. "If, at the end of a treatment," she relates, "I have a relieved patient who's discovered that the root canal experience with me was better than expected, I feel I've done my job. When they leave our practice with more confidence and less fear," she continues, "that's success."

In fact, everything about Dr. Fournier's practice focuses on patient comfort and relaxation. "My office is my world!" she says, "and I've created an environment that both my staff and patients can enjoy. I want my patients to know they are important to me, and that I invest in the practice for them. In fact," she says with a bit of amusement,

"my motto is that if you need a root canal, let's make it the best experience possible."

Her artistic abilities are very much in evidence in the homey, comfortable and very elegant office environment she's painstakingly created. An accomplished painter, two of her oils hang in the office, and fresh flowers welcome every visitor to the office.

How do her patients feel about her? If their letters and testimonials, some of which hang in her office, are any indication, Dr. Fournier is a professional respected by colleagues and referring dentists and revered by those whose dental problems she's alleviated. Somewhat embarrassed, she points to a framed poem in her waiting room, written and sent to her by a very happy patient. One doesn't see devotion like that in every dentist's office! Some patients, she notes, actually prefer seeing a female dentist. "It may be on a personal level, an emotional level or perhaps it's our chairside manner," she says,

The home of Dr. Fournier's endodontic practice, 3275 N. Arlington Heights Road



PHOTO BY ERIC SKOWRONSKI



Young patient Alexa Kogelman gets ready for her visit with Dr. Fournier

“but some patients do perceive female dentists to be gentler or a bit more nurturing.”

When referring dentists send a patient to the practice, it’s generally to find the source of dental pain. Dr. Fournier, in the process of her oral examinations, also looks for lesions on the gums and other relevant factors. “I’ve had several people come to my office for dental pain,” she relates, “and upon examination, I’ve determined that they have a form of herpes zoster (shingles), something affecting the ophthalmic, maxillary or mandibular branches. I’ve also had patients referred for swellings that worsen after eating and then decrease, indicating possible salivary gland blockage.” Dr. Fournier cites these as examples that emphasize the importance of proper evaluation and diagnosis before commencing treatment.

She keeps in close contact with dental colleagues who send their patients to her practice, believing that effective communication is paramount in providing effective patient care. “It’s so important to let my referring dentists know that they can refer to me with confidence, knowing that we will give their patients

the very best of care while working to accommodate their various needs.”

One of those referring general dentists is Dr. Robert Hecht, one of Dr. Fournier’s former dental school faculty members and a trusted mentor and friend. When I speak to him, he’s quick to point out that “Dr. Fournier has taught me as well.” Dr. Hecht refers many patients her way, he tells me, and does so with the greatest confidence. “She runs a very professional office,” he says, “and is extremely accommodating to both patients and referring doctors,” but it’s her warmth and patience and “real-person” persona, he readily admits, that keeps patients coming back.

“Maria Fournier,” he explains, “takes whatever time is necessary to reassure patients, explain what she’s going to do and relax them.” It’s for just that reason Dr. Hecht sends tough cases her way. “I have no qualms whatsoever,” he says, “sending her especially anxious or difficult patients, as she has such a calming effect on them.” Worried patients dreading a root canal and mistrusting dentists in general, he tells me, “Always come back to me raving about Dr. Fournier.” High praise, indeed!

Dr. Fournier’s interest in dentistry extends far beyond her patients and the immediate dental community, however, and she has consistently put herself on the front line when it comes to issues affecting the profession.

A member of the American Association of Endodontists; the Illinois Association of Endodontics, which she currently serves as President; the American Dental Association; the Chicago Dental Society; and the Illinois State Dental Society, Dr. Fournier also serves as Executive Director and past president of the Hellenic-American Dental Society, is a member in the Edgar D. Coolidge Endodontic Study Club and is on the advisory board of the Elite Study Club.

Recently, however, her activism has extended further, to the state level. A delegate for DENT-IL-PAC, the political action committee of the Illinois State Dental Society, she was part of a group of dentist advocates that lobbied senators



and state representatives in the capital last year.

An inveterate traveler, Dr. Fournier has not only traveled to several countries in Europe, but she has also visited Peru, Brazil, Egypt and Israel. Dr. Fournier traveled to Dubai in 2007 with her father. Although their plan was to attend the ribbon cutting for a cosmetic surgical center in which Dr. Fournier's godbrother was involved, Dr. Fournier was delighted to discover that the 95th FDI annual World Dental Congress — the first in an Arab country — was going on concurrently, and was able to attend.

I ask Dr. Fournier to summarize her professional philosophy and she pauses to reflect a moment. "I think I want patients and referring colleagues to know," she says, "that what I do is from the heart! For me, it's not about money or recognition. It is about fulfillment and the pursuit of excellence. It's about being kind, compassionate, caring, dedicated and persistent. It's about not giving up on difficult cases. It is not just a job!

"My staff and I take great pride in our work," she continues, "and do the best we can to accomplish the goals set before us. This becomes particularly important when I treat a phobic or a child who requires extra time and effort. I'm always aware," she says, "of how a positive experience can affect their future as a dental patient, and take the time to listen to them for a few minutes so they know that I care and want to help them."

Her staff, she says, work similarly. "I couldn't ask for better staff," she says proudly. "They're just wonderful, and don't mind staying late for an emergency. They're always there for our



A globetrotting Dr. Fournier in Dubai

Aleeda Steinberg ensures that no questions go unanswered.



PHOTO BY ERIC SKOWRONSKI



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Dr. Fournier helps Alexa relax and feel comfortable.

This poem was written by Dr. Fournier’s patient, Thorne Perry, Jr., in appreciation for her and her staff’s professional skill and personal kindness

To
Dr. Maria J. Fournier
And Her Supporting Cast
Mede Alto Carol Chissy Maggie Mary
In Appreciation of Their Professional Skill and Personal Kindness

The Root Canal

I was told that I needed a root canal,
My tooth 31 had gone bad;
But the thought of having that root canal,
Made me feel somber and sad.

I'd been advised that the job would be painful,
That one shrieks, and moans, and cries;
But I'll have to admit that with Dr. Maria,
That "advice" was just nonsense and lies.

It wasn't exactly a picnic, of course,
To be stuck with a needle and drilled;
And as for the filling inside of each root,
I wasn't especially thrilled.

But grief and agony never arrived,
And horror never transpired;
And while I was glad when the job was all done,
I never, in fact, perspired.

Strong meds were prescribed for possible pain,
When the numbness from Novocain finally receded;
But I never had more than the mildest ache,
Two Advil was all that I needed.

I wish to thank Dr. Maria and Staff,
For my root canal, well done, after all;
And should ever I need an endodontist again,
Dr. Maria J. Fournier is who I will call!

Thorne Perry, Jr. Grateful Patient June 4, 2003

patients, whether it's flagging them down in the parking lot if they're lost, helping them if they're handicapped and experiencing difficulties, or providing pillows, blankets or orange juice to those who may need it.

Not surprisingly, the five women who work with her feel similarly about their boss. "She truly deserves to be put on a pedestal," says Mary Sanford, who has been with her since the day Dr. Fournier began at the old practice. "A lot of stress was put on her young shoulders when the practice transitioned," she says, "but Dr. Fournier was more than equal to it. She's a tremendous teacher, and always takes the time to thoroughly explain things to both staff and patients.

"She truly cares about everyone with whom she comes in contact," Sanford continues, "and is so careful about always following up personally with her patients and with all the colleagues who refer to her." A true example of Dr. Fournier's kindness and caring, notes Sanford, is that "she's so generous about praising her staff and she always does it in front of patients. That makes the praise so much more important!"

Dr. Fournier is living her dream and following her passion. Her patients, her staff and her colleagues are the fortunate recipients of all that she gives to her practice, the community in which she resides and the dental profession she loves.

Dr. Maria J. Fournier's practice is located at 3275 North Arlington Heights Road, Suite 407, Arlington Heights, IL 60004-7709. Dr. Fournier can be reached at (847) 255-3374 or at Endo@MJFournier.com. ■