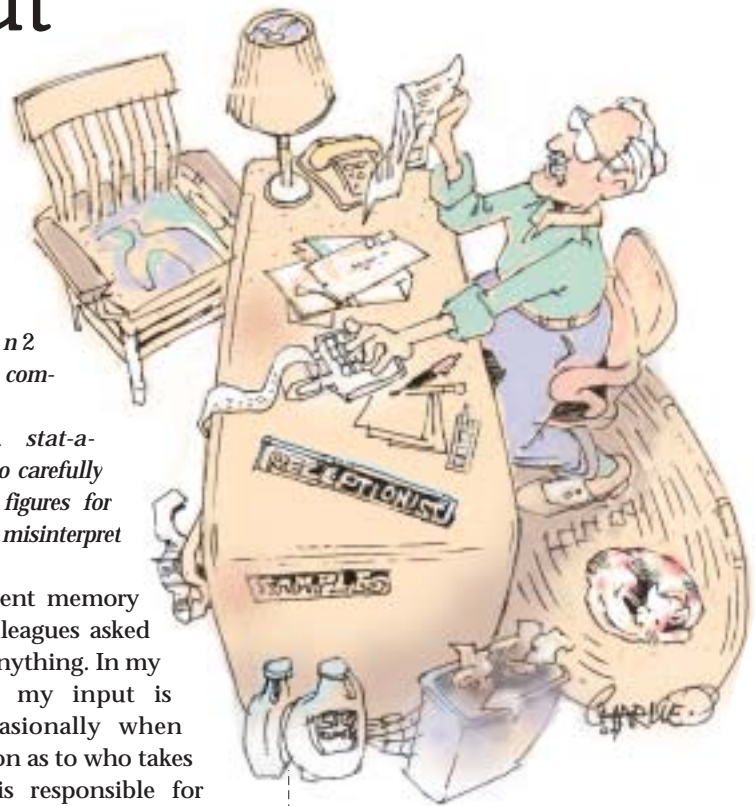


# Statisticians Have It All Figured Out



ta-tis-tic \ sta-'tis-tik \ n 2  
a : a quantity that is computed from a sample

Stat-is-ti-cian \ stat-a-stish-an \ n : one who carefully assembles facts and figures for others who carefully misinterpret them

Not once in recent memory have any of my colleagues asked for my opinion on anything. In my immediate family, my input is required only occasionally when there is some question as to who takes out the trash or is responsible for replenishing the gas tank. I am surprised, therefore, to recently receive a lengthy survey requesting my opinions on dozens of topics.

**Q. During an average week how many full dentures do you seat?**

- 0 - 1
- 2 - 5
- 6 - 50
- Over 500

This is a tricky question. My worst nightmare is seating more than one denture every six months, but I don't want this to be interpreted somehow that my supply of denture adhesive samples is to be terminated, so I fudge a little and check box No. 3. Six to 50 sounds as if I am reasonably busy, but not a denture fanatic.

**Q. Which of the following mouthwashes do you recommend?**

- Listerine
- Scope
- Rembrandt
- Liquid Plumber

Whichever I have the most free samples of. When I give away the free samples, it is not necessarily a recommendation, it's more of a house cleaning. The patient thinks it has my blessing and as long as I believe the product will not actually poison him, it works out well for everybody.

**Q. How many patients do you see in an average month?**

Statistics are more pliable than facts and are, in fact, like witnesses; you can always get them to testify for either side.

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First of all, there is no such thing as an average month, or an average day, for that matter. I have feast or famine days and months. Statisticians hate this kind of an answer. If all statisticians were placed end-to-end, they would come to endless conclusions, so I make it easy for them by supplying a figure they can live with. I have chosen 123 as a number that sounds possible without any hint of grandiose production bragadocio. Statistics are more pliable than facts and are, in fact, like witnesses; you can always get them to testify for either side.

**Q. How many dentists are in your practice?**

- 1
- 2
- 3 - 9½
- 163

It is so embarrassing to admit that I operate in an HMO-less Mom-and-Pop practice like some shoe cobbler out of the Middle Ages that I always put down 8. I figure this is my one and only chance to appear in somebody's eyes as a Big Shot, even if it is a statistician who can always use facts and figures to support anything, especially himself.

**Q. How many amalgams, implants, full mouth reconstructions, third molar surgical extractions and full banded cases do you do in an average year?**

Now, I could go back into my last year's appointment book and laborious-

ly count the number of these operations page by page, but it would seriously interfere with my post-lunch nap, so I enter 1947. That was the year I was married and it has always occupied a special place in my heart.

**Q. What was your before-tax gross earnings from your practice last year?**

- \$100,000 - \$150,000
- \$150,000 - \$400,000
- \$400,000 - \$1,000,000
- \$1,000,000 - \$975,612,733

The last thing I want to admit is a figure, however accurate, that puts me in the bottom 5 percent of widely published professional incomes.

Another tricky question. The last thing I want to admit is a figure, however accurate, that puts me in the bottom 5 percent of widely published professional incomes. To statisticians, fractions speak louder than words, so carefully threading my way somewhere between accepted poverty levels and the chance of attracting the attention of the Internal Revenue Service, I have chosen \$361,493.16 as a respectable income for a average dentist in an average town in an average part of the country working average hours during an average week with the average number of disabling afflictions, one of which is the dislike of filling out surveys.

A representative sample of 100,000 dentists is thought to be in the neighborhood of 150 with an average of seven replies considered statistically significant. When you read the results of

any survey in which I have had the honor of participating, keep in mind that statistics can prove anything by statistics. If he weren't already deceased, you could confirm this with Tom Dewey, or even Al Gore if he is still with us.

CDA