

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Office of Theseus

In orthodontics, we speak of practices almost as living entities. An office has a name, a reputation, a recognizable style. Patients say they are “going to Kravitz,” as though the place itself carries personality and memory. Yet offices are not static. Assistants retire, associates join, and new technologies replace old techniques. The transformation occurs gradually. That quiet evolution raises an old philosophical question: when something continually changes, what makes it the same?

The question traces back to ancient Greece. Theseus, the mythic king of Athens who defeated the mighty Minotaur, was said to have sailed home on a wooden ship that the Athenians later preserved as a civic monument. As the vessel's timbers decayed, caretakers replaced each plank carefully, one by one, so that the ship would endure.

Centuries later, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes revisited the story in what has come to be known as the Ship of Theseus paradox. He proposed an additional twist: if the discarded planks were collected and rebuilt into a second vessel, which ship would be the true one—the vessel continuously repaired or the one reconstructed from its original materials? The paradox endures because it asks a deceptively simple question: Is identity defined by original substance, by history, or by something less tangible?

Patients sometimes witness this transformation when an orthodontic practice changes hands. At first, little seems different. The same assistants greet them at the front desk, and the same patient photographs still hang on the walls. Over time, however, subtle differences begin to emerge. Treatment philosophies shift, and occasionally a case already underway is guided in a slightly different direction. The office still appears familiar, yet its character is gradually being replaced, plank by plank.

The transformation becomes more pronounced when a practice is sold to a corporation that retains the practice name. Behind the scenes,

supplies are purchased through a centralized office, clinical protocols are standardized, and scheduling templates are optimized for efficiency. Production targets quietly shape the daily rhythm of the office. The treatment philosophy and patient care that once defined the practice no longer come from the same source. The name remains, but its direction does not.

These changes rarely occur overnight. Treatment recommendations begin to favor systems that are easier to standardize, most commonly aligners and remote monitoring. New orthodontists rotate through the clinic, and longtime assistants who once anchored the office gradually disappear. Appointment schedules tighten and conversations feel more scripted as efficiency and collections become the overriding goals. Corporations often reassure sellers that little will change, though the opposite is usually true.

For young orthodontists considering a start-up or practice purchase, this reality should be encouraging. Private practices continue to thrive because patients value continuity, trust, and the daily presence of the orthodontist who personally leads treatment. They develop their own culture and philosophy of care, shaped by judgment, experience, and long-term relationships with patients and staff. As for that large corporate office up the street, it may carry a popular name, but it is now a different ship entirely.

Philosophers never resolved the Ship of Theseus paradox. For orthodontists, however, the answer is far more obvious. A practice is not the equipment, the products, or even the name on the sign. It is the orthodontist—the captain at the helm—whose judgment guides treatment, whose values shape patient care, and whose presence builds trust over time. Remove that doctor, and the practice inevitably becomes something else. The paradox may be unsolved, but in orthodontics the answer is clear. The rest is Greek.

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