

## Is There Ever Too Much?



Dental education has certainly changed since I entered dental school. As we all know, dental school was and continues to be a textbook, workbook, and computer manual-driven education. Much of it is based upon the art and technical nature of dental care. Although some of our professors would occasionally mention scientific journals, it did not appear that those journals presented clinical training toward the skills that were so important in those early days of our professional development. As we developed in our professional careers, it became apparent that there was a level of knowledge, beyond the technical level, that would be necessary for us to excel in our professional careers.

In the mid-20th century, the average dentist understood that there were a few alternate sources of information that they could follow in an effort to enhance their level of knowledge. Indeed, there were national, international, and regional publications that assisted in the search. The national journal, in my case the *Journal of the American Dental Association*, published a number of scientific articles, opinion-based articles, advertisements, and public interest pieces. In conjunction with the national journal, there was also a national newsletter that provided topical updates, op-ed pages, and more advertisements. The national journal was a good source for information, although it did not appear to represent the very “cutting edge” of science. The newsletter started out as a quick and informative read. Indeed, it was not scientific but it was informative. Over time, the newsletter format has gradually expanded to the point today where it takes more than a couple of hours to take in all the information that is presented in each issue. Add to this the local and regional dental societies that also provide publications for their members. In those publications, we tend to find a small number of articles that demonstrate procedures as case or technical reports and the occasional “scientific” report.

This is probably where we all started in our quest for “cutting-edge” knowledge and skills. With time, we recognized that many of the disciplines within dentistry identified the need to create journals dedicated to the distribution of knowledge. The readers of these journals enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to witness the development of the science of dentistry. We simultaneously came to understand that very few of those journals were read by a large percentage of dentists. The information was available, but the distribution of that information was often limited to individual subscribers and university-based libraries that maintained these publications over time.

The Internet seems to have changed the way that we look at the dissemination of scientific information. Today, almost all of the scientific journals within dentistry have web-based sites that publish the material that has routinely been found in the scientific journals. In some instances, the web-based articles appear before the paper journal is released to the public. We can see this when articles are listed as “Epub ahead of print.” There are even some journals that publish only on the Internet. Truly, the days of limited circulation and associated limited dissemination of scientific information are now a thing of the past.

We certainly can discuss the merits of having the feel of a journal in one’s hands. There seems to be a visceral response to that ability to hold the publication that you are reading, but we also realize that society is ever evolving and that there will likely come a time when electronic publications will become the predominant source of information. Perhaps the next generation of Kindle or iPad will simulate the feel of a book or magazine; only time will tell. A transition away from print and toward electronic publications has already occurred in the lay press, where many newspapers and magazines have found it financially impossible to continue with paper print versions.

We have all heard it said that knowledge is power. If this sentiment is correct, we all benefit from a broader knowledge in contrast to a narrower knowledge base. One must consider, however, that there is value in the peer review process that may not be seen with totally open forums that discuss topics without performance of any vetting process before information is entered into the discussion. Perhaps the greatest value of peer review is that it limits the outflow of information to that which has been judged “print worthy.”

An example of unfiltered or poorly filtered information arrived on my computer recently. A message appeared in the upper right-hand corner of my monitor telling me that one of my email accounts had received a message from a dental newsletter extolling the virtues of tooth brushing and flossing as part of the daily oral hygiene regimen. I certainly am not going to take a stance against daily oral hygiene; I will, however, raise the question of whether or not my professional life was enhanced by seeing this message in the year 2015. Please note that my generation of dental school graduates is reaching an age where retirement from active dental practice is on the horizon. This means that I have been around for a while and have witnessed many ideas during my career. Despite the revelation that brushing and flossing of teeth may be beneficial toward a person’s dental and physical health, I feel the need to point out that this information was well understood many decades before my career began.

Why would such information appear as a news item on a dental forum managed by a very large and influential dental society in the year 2015? To answer that question, I decided to see if there was a citation that would identify the source of this not-so-earth-shattering tidbit of information. Indeed, the source that was cited happened to be an article in the commercial lay press. Seeing a relevant dental article in a magazine that is read by the general public is, by my way of thinking, a positive factor for the profession of dentistry. Repeating such information in a professional dental forum seems to me to be superfluous. Perhaps there are times when there is simply too much of a good thing.

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