



The Dentist of Tomorrow

It is easy to be awed by the rapid changes in technology and research that completely changed the face of dentistry. But when was the last time we

stopped to think beyond the intricacy of the techniques and patient management that we will have to teach tomorrow's dentists and actually start thinking about the role that these dentists will have in our society? Before I continue, it is important for me to emphasize that the vision I will present to you is a compilation of many ideas that were previously espoused by deans and other leaders in dental education.

A previous editorial (February 2005 issue, page 87) has alluded to a comment made years ago that dentists are overeducated for what they do and undereducated for what they might do. So what more can we do? If the basic assumption that many patients see their dentist much more often than they see their physician is true, wouldn't it make sense to provide patients with more comprehensive care during those visits to the dental office?

Doesn't it make sense to address issues of behavior modification, such as smoking cessation, where patients go with some frequency? Similarly, isn't it difficult to deal with problems related to compliance with medical treatment at a site where patients rarely show up? Shouldn't we be thinking about putting together a dental team that can provide a better scope of care that is supervised by a dentist with an appropriate broader knowledge base?

On the flip side, we may have to start thinking about delegating some of our traditional roles to other healthcare providers. For example, if the only healthcare provider in a rural area is a physician, he should be able to put together the resources so that some of the oral health care needs of his patients can be addressed. It should be noted that all of this in no way diminishes our commitment to technical and clinical excellence.

Radical? No. Controversial? Maybe. If raising the quality of healthcare and providing better accessibility to health services is our primary goal, then none of the healthcare specialties should be territorial and exclusive. Dentistry is currently undergoing one of its most prosperous times ever, and the future looks even brighter. We receive high levels of trust and respect from our patients. Brilliant young individuals seek to join our profession. This next generation is capable of playing a bigger role in our society. A bigger role requires a completely different approach to dental education, and if you think what I have described so far sounds somewhat futuristic, then maybe we should share with you our vision of how dental education could be structured, what it should include, and what methods will be used to deliver and disseminate such knowledge. This is where the real excitement and fun begins. The future belongs to those who show up. Let's make sure that we are at the table figuring out how primary healthcare can be appropriately provided.

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