

The Dental Technician—Educated or Trained?

There seems to be a universal paradoxical relationship between dentists and dental laboratory technicians. If ever the expression "love-hate relationship" were properly applied, it is in this association. Before all the cries of protest are heard, let me make it clear that the feeling is expressed as much from technicians as from dentists. In a situation that has evolved from mutual need and abilities, it is patently counterproductive to both parties for this relationship to exist. Interestingly, the problem appears to be magnified as the skills and abilities of either member are improved. Most of us can cite situations where the unskilled technician works with an equally inept dentist—and both are happy. Everything "fits"; nothing is returned for a remake. What one knows, one sees. The lack of discrimination (or worse, the lack of caring) by both the technician and dentist results in a mutually acceptable restoration that is inadequate by other standards. The more discriminating and demanding the technician and/or dentist become, the more the relationship is strained when either fails to perform to the other's standards.

Certainly, it doesn't require close analysis to discern some of the contributing problems. Dentists complain that the technician doesn't follow instructions, that details have been omitted, that the technician should have "known better." Technicians will say that the work authorization for the remake contains the information that should have been there in the first place, and both agree that there is a lack of communication and understanding.

As dental schools are increasingly pressed to find time to teach additional information, there is a progressive erosion of the time allotted to teaching laboratory skills. Often students do not comprehend the procedures they ask others to perform. There is frequently a misunderstanding of the reason to include laboratory procedures in the dental school curriculum. When laboratory procedures are taught, they are rarely learned well enough to perform them at a clinically desirable level and within a timeframe that makes their practice economically feasible. The primary reason for learning laboratory skills is to make possible the competent evaluation of the work received from the laboratory and to communicate with the technician in an understanding and reasonable manner.

While the laboratory training of the dentist is being diminished, at the same time there is a progressive decrease in the education of technicians. In the United States, fewer laboratory technician students are attending 2-year programs. Fewer technicians are emerging from training programs with any academic comprehension of the skills they are required to perform. I regret having to observe that the United States has lost the

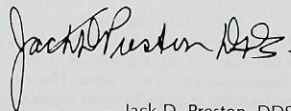
technical edge it once had in dental laboratory technology. If this is doubted, attend international meetings where a substantial number of technicians present their work. The training and education in some of the European countries and in Japan are producing more technicians at the higher skill levels.

The leaders in dental technology are aware of the erosion of the education process, and many groups are trying to mandate licensing of dental technicians, both at a state and national level. Some of these efforts have been successful, many have not.

I fail to understand why state dental societies oppose, sometimes vigorously, the movement to raise the standards of a group that wants to improve itself. Although some of the legislative efforts have been coupled with other political aspects, making the proposed legislation less palatable, the basic premise that technicians should be licensed to practice their skills is a reasonable one. That is, it is reasonable *if* licensure can avoid some of the less altruistic impositions that are sometimes attempted. Maybe if licensure required demonstration of competence, completion of a formal program of education and training, and participation in continuing education programs, technicians would be more proud of their role in dentistry.

Would the result cost the dentist and patient more? Probably, on the surface. The toll is being paid now in remakes and substandard work. It is also being paid in the general lack of self-esteem that is frequently found in dental technology. How can there be great pride when the government officially views dental technicians as unskilled laborers? While licensure may not be the only answer, it is certainly a part of that solution. Some action is needed to ensure that the education of dental technicians is improved. This can only happen if dentists and organized dentistry support the efforts of technicians to improve the standards they themselves must meet. Representation of dental technology in the Federation of Prosthodontic Organizations is a good start, but enhanced awareness of the problems and active political involvement at the local and state level are needed.

The dental technician deserves the assistance of the dental profession. How can we expect support at the clinical level if we don't provide it in the political arena?



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