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Should the concept of the three-thread faculty member exist in academic dentistry today?

For many years the ideal academic dentist was one who could be a highly proficient clinician, an excellent teacher, and an innovative researcher. In my 30 years in academic dentistry, I was fortunate enough to meet only a few dentists that fulfilled these three challenging tasks; however, I have met many that excel in two of the three.

Dentistry has evolved significantly, and with this growth came more demands for clinicians: They must master many more techniques and methods than in the past, and in addition the administrative work associated with the clinical practice is more challenging and requires more time and training. Similar trends are affecting the field of research, as it is very difficult to perform high-end research on a part-time basis. Being a good educator requires full-time attention, and many of us do not have the time needed to acquire the necessary training for the task and to provide instruction on the level we could and would like to impart.

Academic dental institution leaders should re-think the structure of their faculty. While there will always be a few singular dentists who will succeed in mastering all three tasks, most of us will need to focus on a main area of interest. The faculty should be composed of exceptional researchers, educators, and clinicians, each in her or his respective field, who will collaborate and support each other on individual missions as well as common goals.

A program we initiated in Rochester University allows young faculty members to spend half of their time in the clinic and the rest performing research either in the laboratory or conducting clinical studies. In time, the faculty members partaking in this program will need to decide which of the two paths they prefer; however, they will carry the experience gained working in both fields into their more focused practice. They can become predominantly researchers who will have a strong understanding of the clinic, or clinicians that are highly familiar with research processes and methods. I also believe that academic dental institutions should have professional educators that oversee and support the educational process, including not only academic lectures but also the challenging task of clinical instruction.

Clinical faculty members can and should continue to do research together with faculty whose main track is research. They should also be trained in performing secondary research (systematic reviews and meta-analyses). The interaction between specialized faculty, each excelling in a particular field, may lead to higher level clinical practice, more innovative research, and an overall enhanced educational process.

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