

Old Doom and Gloom Opinions Not True for the 1990s: Evidence Shows Trends for Increased Need for Dentists

Many scientific studies present a future for dentistry that is in direct contradiction to a report by Dr John W. Hein, DMD, PhD, which appeared in a recent edition of *Dental Management*. In the 1980s some of the popular media reported individual dentist's opinions of doom and gloom for the future practice of dentistry. These reports were widely read and accepted. Newer studies by reputable dental scientists, using reliable modeling procedures, refute these doomsday prophecies.

Such respected national forecasters of dental practice needs as Chester W. Douglass, DDS at Harvard; John W. Reinhardt, DDS, MS, MPH at Iowa; and Howard L. Bailit, DMD, PhD at Columbia agree that the future of dentistry is bright, given the demographic, epidemiologic, and economic population patterns of the 1990s that will continue into the 21st century.

These scientists and others have intensely studied recent trends of measurable social patterns, as they relate to dental practice, and have defined four factors that influence dental service: the population at risk, the incidence and prevalence of dental diseases, the accepted standards of care, and the perceived need and expectations toward dental health by the public.¹

The population demographics and dental disease patterns will undergo a dramatic shift during the next 25 years, yet none spell disaster for dentistry. Quite the opposite, our profession will be in greater demand. With regard to demographics, there will be an increase in the life span of older adults and the "baby boomers" will enter retirement age with natural dentition. Both occurrences will cause an increase, not a decrease, in need for dentists during the 21st century. Although dental caries, nationally, is declining among the young, studies by many including the Federation of Prosthodontic Organizations, L.H. Meskin, and H.H. Chauncey et al²⁻⁴ show that older adults (aged 60 and older) with natural dentition will experience a caries rate greater than those in the young and middle-aged category. The Bureau of Census Population projections for the year 2000 show


that this new category of persons will, by sheer numbers, greatly increase the need for adult restorations.⁵ This need is predicted to be three times the decrease in pedodontic dentistry operative needs, and the needs may be so complex that the time for delivery of care will exceed that now experienced for average operative procedures.⁶

Dental care will change to match the patterns of the society; while, at the same time, there will remain a perceived need among the baby boomers for dental care. This group will have the economic resources to obtain quality dental care. This combination of need and resources has no precedent. Add to this national trend the unique social landscape in many parts of the country such as Southern California, which is so markedly different from the norm. We in Los Angeles truly do not meet any of the old doom and gloom parameters. We have, more than any other geographic group of dental professionals, reasons to be optimistic about our professional futures. The Los Angeles Basin provides an unparalleled growth in population and a unique mix of patients for the 21st century. Our location in the Sun Belt combined with our Pacific Rim location will continue to provide a patient pool unlike any other. Growth is the mainstay of our population projections: both native and immigrant. The assimilation of varied immigrant populations into all levels of our local society over the next 25 to 30 years will make them an integral part of the patients requiring our care. They will provide a population that needs the more traditional types of pediatric and restorative care no longer required in the native US population.

The role of the dental specialist in this scenario can be easily estimated. Prosthodontics, periodontics, orthodontics, oral and maxillofacial surgery, and endodontics will become even more important as the need for complex treatment is presented to the profession in the future.

As professionals, and as thinking people, let us allow ourselves to question who subjectively summarize our fu-

ture for us. Dentistry has been the leader in analyzing changing patient needs—other health care professionals are only now facing the challenges that we did 15 years ago. We did it then and all objective evidence says the future holds prosperity. It is our responsibility to encourage the best and brightest to enter our profession by objectively delineating the future of our profession in the next century.



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