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The 'I' Team

Dave Mathews, Vince Kokich and Frank Spear — the superstar apostles of interdisciplinary dentistry — get ready for their final joint lecture

MAYBE NONE OF THIS EVER HAPPENS IF RALPH O'Connor's kid has straighter teeth.

And then maybe a bunch of dentists never get together in Tacoma to kick around ideas for a different model of collaborative practice.

Then maybe three of them never become lecture partners and spend the next quarter-century spreading the gospel of interdisciplinary dentistry all over the world. Maybe.

But you doubt it.

Somehow, you get the feeling that the partnership among Vince Kokich, Dave Mathews and Frank Spear was inevitable. That the qualities that have made these UW-trained dentists into lecture superstars — their superb teaching skills, their love for the interplay of ideas — would have surfaced regardless and led them down this path. That sooner or later they would have linked up, because the simple truth is that these guys just plain like hanging out together.

Dr. Mathews ('74 Cert/Perio), 64, recalls an appearance last year in Bilbao, Spain: "I introduced us, and I spoke in Spanish, and everyone's laughing. I got back [to my seat], and I told them I'd said you guys are dumb [unprintables]."

He pauses for a second and flashes a wicked grin. "I didn't really, but..."

"I think our most fun is the night before the lecture," says

Dr. Spear ('79 DDS, '85 MS/Pros), 56. "We're usually in a hotel room, having dinner with each other. We sit around, put the lecture together, and it's the creative process, getting the juices flowing — let's do it this way or that way.

"Being together, just the three of us, whether we're in Zurich or Tokyo or Barcelona, it's just a fun time."

It won't be quite as much fun from now on, though. Dr. Kokich ('71 DDS, '74 MS/Ortho) has decided to give up being "somewhere else every Friday" and leave the lecture circuit. In September he'll deliver a final talk in Croatia, his ancestral homeland.

Before then, the three dentists will give their final joint lecture on June 12 with an all-day program at Seattle's Benaroya Hall, where they drew 1,400 listeners for the Ernest Jones Memorial Lecture in 2005.

Drs. Dave Mathews (from left), Vince Kokich and Frank Spear bow out as a team at Seattle's Benaroya Hall on June 12.



It will be the last in a long string of enthusiastic crowds. Those who have attended one of their talks can tell you why the team has packed audiences in for more than two decades.

"They were amazing," says Dr. Jonathan Sandler, conference chairman for the British Orthodontic Society, which hosted the trio in London in 2004. "We drew the biggest audience the BOS has ever seen at a spring meeting. ... The three of them entertained and wowed the British audience. A number of my European friends also flew into London just for the meeting."

"They've been great for dentistry," says Dr. Don Joondeph ('70 Cert/Ortho) of Bellevue, Wash. While president of the American Association of Orthodontists, he hosted the trio at the AAO national meeting in 1992 in Seattle, where they gave the Mershon Lecture, the association's highest form of recognition, to an audience of 3,500.

"They've gone a long way to improve patient care by stressing how important it is for dentists and specialists to interact together in the care and treatment of patients," Dr. Joondeph says. "Treatment gets more sophisticated, and they keep their information very current. Their presentations are supported by evidence — not just anecdotal case reports."

"They present in a very ordered, practical way," says Dr. Bob London ('81 Cert/Perio), director of graduate periodontics at the UW School of Dentistry. And one more thing: "They are also each individually very nice guys."

IT ALL GOES BACK TO RALPH O'CONNOR, WHO PLANTED the seeds of this collaboration a quarter-century ago. Like so many other medical professionals, the Tacoma dentist would swap services for his nine children with other providers, and he sent one of them to Dr. Kokich for orthodontic treatment in 1979.

But he made a demand: "OK, here's the deal. You can't take the braces off until I say the patient is finished — because I know what's best for my patient."

It didn't faze Dr. Kokich. "I looked at him and said, 'OK, makes sense to me.' I said to myself, 'You know, four eyes are better than two.'" Over the next few years, the two men formed a close bond.

In 1984, Dr. O'Connor thought of bringing Tacoma-area specialists together to form an interdisciplinary team. He

formed a group of nine, with himself as general dentist. He enlisted two oral surgeons, an orthodontist (Dr. Kokich), a periodontist (Dr. Mathews), a pediatric dentist, two endodontists and a prosthodontist (Dr. Spear). Together they formed the Northwest Network for Dental Excellence.

At that time, the term "multidisciplinary" was often heard in dentistry. Dr. O'Connor made a subtle but critical shift in emphasis: "interdisciplinary." Dr. Kokich explains the concept: "There is a way for those disciplines to interact in a productive



At play (clockwise from left): Dr. Kokich on the Matterhorn; Dr. Spear hunting the perfect shot; Dr. Mathews belting a line drive.



manner, where they understand one another's needs and can help one another. The patient benefits, but everyone also learns in the process. If I'm on that team, I'm going to learn a little bit more about endo or perio or restorative, just because I'm playing a part in the discussion."

Dr. O'Connor had started developing the concept when he was dealing with complex cases. He'd interview patients in detail to determine what they wanted, but still needed to accompany them to interviews with specialists before and after office hours.

"I realized I had to play the quarterback, and that meant I had to have accountability for the process," he recalls. "So I started presenting the patient's history and asking the specialists what they could do for me. We would open it up for discussion, and that's where the education process began. All these specialists started seeing the other person's point of view."

At the Northwest Network's first meeting, Dr. O'Connor said, "I want you to remember this word: networking." No longer would one dentist finish his work and simply hand the patient off to another. The whole course of treatment would be planned out carefully. Flexible options would be built in,



and nobody's work would conflict with anyone else's.

As Dr. Kokich says: "We've shown a demonstration where Ralph can lead us through the diagnosis and management. By the time we come out 45 minutes later, we have Plan A, Plan B and Plan C, and the flow chart, and all of a sudden it's understandable. What we're trying to do is show general dentists that if you want to do this, you can't do it on your own — you have to have a team."

"The challenge in dentistry was that a lot of specialists tended to have been raised in isolation," says Dr. Spear. "In school, there was not a lot of interchange between specialty programs. The one exception was at UW, when I went through the grad program in periodontics and prosthodontics. But orthodontics and endodontics didn't have any interaction with us. I think that separation just carried into the marketplace in practice."

New endowment seeks to sharpen teaching skills

THE LECTURE BY VINCE KOKICH, DAVE MATHEWS AND Frank Spear at Seattle's Benaroya Hall on June 12 will be much more than a swan song: It will be the foundation for a legacy.

"All of us wanted to leave something behind, with our names attached to it, just because of this wonderful relationship we've developed over the years, and our names are associated with one another," says Dr. Kokich.

So the three hope to raise \$250,000 and attract matching funds for a new professorship that will further elevate the quality of teaching at the School of Dentistry.

The endowment will support a new part-time teaching position, bringing an expert in faculty development and training to SOD to lead workshops and provide one-on-one consultation with faculty. The new professor could also offer courses to graduate students who want to teach, or even to dental pre-doctoral students looking ahead to training staff or delivering presentations to dental societies.

"We've learned from one another," Dr. Kokich says of himself and his lecture partners. "We've seen what doesn't work in teaching, and have been able to use that to teach people. We realized we never learned that in dental school. I never had the opportunity as a faculty member, if I wanted to improve my teaching skills, to be guided by people who do this for a living."

Says Dr. Spear: "Historically, dentistry has been taught by a model that's not the most nurturing or open-minded — not UW, but dental schools generally have a reputation of being dogmatic. It's necessary to some extent, because you have to get people through.

"My vision is to take the instructors at the school and have them become more effective at nurturing and teaching."

Dr. Mathews also sees a further benefit for academic dentistry, which faces a growing problem of attracting new blood: "We feel that if a student is touched by a great teacher here, he may decide that he wants to do that."

All three can point to that kind of influence in their academic and professional lives.

Dr. Kokich says the people who taught him at the School of Dentistry left an indelible mark. Dr. Al Moore, onetime dean, taught him "a lot about history and how dentistry evolves — how looking back on history to see how that shapes things we do today was important."

He says Dr. Dick Riedel, a successor to Dr. Moore as Orthodontics Department chairman, preached an evidence-based approach: "He was the one who was really open-minded and allowed us to look at all different things, and based on what we were taught, make judgments and select the thing that seemed to be most appropriate."

The late Professor Emeritus Ben Moffett, who passed away last October, was Dr. Kokich's research chair. Dr. Moffett taught him much about writing, but passed on an even more important lesson: "In a discipline like orthodontics, or anything in dentistry, the things I do on a day-to-day basis when treating patients have a biologic mechanism that allows them to work or not work."

For Frank Spear, the role models started at home. His mother, a second-grade teacher, is "probably the most kind, nurturing person I ever met in my life. She believed in education." His father, a mechanic he calls "brilliant," would take the young Frank to work and explain everything he did painstakingly.

Dr. Mathews found inspiration from college instructors in anthropology and chemistry, but his skills as a communicator were sparked by two high school teachers in Van Nuys, Calif.: "Mr. Frisius, who got me turned on to English literature — he was a real character who used words like 'howsomeverly' — and Mr. Kessler, who got me really excited about words."

And that's the main point of the endowment — creating a standard of inspirational instruction at the School of Dentistry. As Dr. Spear says: "Let's teach people how to be more effective teachers and educators. If that happens, it changes the whole nature and character of a school."

And in Dr. O'Connor's vision, there was another key team member who had been overlooked all too often: the patient.

"What Ralph O'Connor always said was, 'Don't prejudge the patient.' You might think that the patient wants just the Pinto, but you need to tell him what the Cadillac is. Tell him what the options are, and get down to the Chevy," says Dr. Mathews. "Ralph was a master at creating the vision [for the patient] and then continually reminding the patient of the vision when he came in."

"These are very complex cases — accident cases, people with major health problems — and they can run three to five years," Dr. O'Connor says. "The goal and the time that it took was variable. I had patients that took over 10 years to achieve the vision they wanted."

It was all about getting patients fully invested in their own treatment, and dentists understanding that "perfect" outcomes were not necessarily good outcomes.

"Perfection is a word that should never belong in dentistry," says Dr. Kokich. "My emphasis is that if you have a patient that presents to you at 50 or 60 years of age, that has an existing malocclusion that's worked for them, how can I make a judgment that that's wrong when it's worked for 50 or 60 years? I need to be realistic, to not change everything simply because it seems to be more ideal, when we can't prove that."

Says Dr. Mathews: "Perfection is a disease. I always fall a little short."

The interdisciplinary approach isn't problem-free. Practical questions can intrude, as with implants. Not only are they performed by endodontists, but also by periodontists, general dentists and oral surgeons. So if an interdisciplinary team is handling the case, how do you decide who does the implants (and gets the fee)?

Different cases may demand different answers, but it all starts with a willingness to look at an issue in multiple ways. Dr. Spear says he took that attitude from instructors at UW such as Ralph Yuodelis ('64 MS/Pros, '65 Cert/Perio), Bill Ammons ('70 MS/Perio) and Bob Faucher ('77 MS/Pros).

"They were open to sharing multiple techniques or modalities of treatment, and then would explain why they chose the one they did, as opposed to being very rigid," Dr. Spear says. "All of them were great thinkers, and they weren't at all rigid or dogmatic. I think that's one of Vincent and Dave's and my strengths."

Dr. O'Connor agrees. "They have trust in what the other person is doing, so they can disagree with each other in front of the audience, and yet not feel like they're criticizing or demeaning. They're letting the audience see the process of how it works. This is how this interchange has to happen. The in-



Vincent G. Kokich
DDS, MSD

Dr. Kokich, a professor in the Department of Orthodontics at the University of Washington, has an orthodontic practice in Tacoma, Wash. In addition to publishing dozens of book chapters and articles, he has delivered over 900 presentations on interdisciplinary dentistry and on the relationship of orthodontics to esthetics, periodontics, implants, and restorative dentistry. He has been president of the American Board of Orthodontics and the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry and has been named Distinguished Alumnus by the UW Dental Alumni Association.



David P. Mathews
DDS, PS

Dr. Mathews, who has a periodontics practice in Tacoma, Wash, is an affiliate assistant professor in the Graduate Periodontics Department at the University of Washington. He is a member of several organizations, including the Academy of Esthetic Dentistry and the Northwest Network for Dental Excellence. He writes and lectures on implants in the esthetic zone and on interdisciplinary dentistry.



Frank M. Spear
DDS, MSD

Dr. Spear, an affiliate professor in the graduate prosthodontics program at the University of Washington, maintains a private practice in Seattle limited to esthetics and fixed prosthodontics. He is founder and director of the Seattle Institute of Advanced Dental Education and lectures widely on esthetic and restorative dentistry. His honors include the Saul Schluger Memorial Award for Excellence in Diagnosis and Treatment Planning from the Seattle Study Club, in 1996, and the inaugural President's Award from the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry, along with Dr. Kokich, in 2004. His memberships include the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry, the American Academy of Restorative Dentistry, the American College of Prosthodontics, the Pierre Fauchard Academy and the International College of Dentists. He is also a former president of the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry.



terchange is really a very important part of the process."

Dr. Mathews says that whenever he meets with his lecture partners, he'll bring along his toughest cases. "We put them up on the board and we all talk about them," he says. "Sometimes you go in there thinking, 'I've got the answer, I know how to treat this case, I've got the best plan,' but I'm going to see if the group confirms it. Invariably, they bring up other ideas I didn't even think about, and it's sort of humbling. That's the benefit of having three or more thought processes going on in a very creative environment."

It's not just the thought process, either. Dr. Kokich stresses the importance of tools such as the diagnostic wax-up.

"Dentists and orthodontists are famous for not doing that

final lecture in Dubrovnik.) And he'd like to finish handing off his orthodontic practice to son Vince ('99 MS/Ortho, '97 Res/GPR), 38, who has often lectured with him.

Dr. Spear still has a very full plate in front of him. He operates the Spear Institute for Advanced Dental Education in Seattle and Scottsdale, Ariz., and is expanding the Arizona facility with new classes and faculty. He expects to teach and lecture for another five to 10 years.

He lives with his wife, Charlene, on Whidbey Island. The two met when she attended one of his lectures at UCLA about nine years ago, and just married last June. "Charlene and I love Whidbey," where they have 8 acres, he says. He's an avid amateur photographer and sells his fine art prints. He

"Their influence across the country is just amazing."

step," he says. "It is a little bit time-consuming — it takes away from chair time.

"People tend to find that not a labor of love — just a labor. What they don't realize is the importance of it to what they do at the chair. They could be wasting a lot of time at the chair doing things that are inappropriate, because the wax-up would show them that they're going in the wrong direction. It is so fundamental."

For these three dentists, so is a sense of humor. Dr. Mathews recalls one night before a lecture in Zurich, Switzerland, when a jet-lagged Dr. Spear, struggling to stay awake as the three planned their presentation, looked at Dr. Kokich and said: "I can't understand why you're doing this. You're on an airplane every week. Don't you get tired of this?" Dr. Kokich looked at him and said, "Because I'm a teacher."

Says Dr. Mathews: "Frank was dumbfounded, and so we always throw that back at him: 'Well, Frank, don't you know that Vince is a TEACHER?'"

They can kid one another so comfortably because none of them has anything to prove. "One of the greatest gifts that Vince and Dave and I have had is that we're all very competent, but our egos have never gotten in the way of each other, and we're all very lucky that way," says Dr. Spear. "We all graduated No. 1 in our class from dental school. Every one of us had something to offer that the other two don't."

Dr. Kokich may be preparing to leave the team, but he'll still be active. He edited extensively for journals early in his career, and would like to do more of that.

He's also looking forward to more time for gardening, skiing, golfing, and kicking around his summer house at Horsehead Bay on South Puget Sound with his wife of 40 years, Marilyn. (Also of Croatian descent, she'll travel to his

also enjoys working with wrought iron, doing railings and sculpture; he says it's especially satisfying to work in a big, powerful medium as a change of pace from the demanding delicacy of dentistry.

Dr. Mathews, who's a neighbor of Dr. Kokich's at Horsehead Bay, looks forward to completing a book with him on surgical and orthodontic management of impacted teeth. They've been at it for about five years, and Dr. Mathews savors the chance to finish the project: "I know he wants to do it, because we have about 35 years of material."

Dr. Mathews also has played baseball in the national Roy Hobbs Hardball World Series senior league for 20 years, and his team won a fourth straight national championship last year. But his aching knees are telling him it's time to quit, and that message was driven home at a tournament the previous year. Pitching in relief, Dr. Mathews fired what he thought was his best fastball to an opposing slugger. The batter popped it up, tossed his bat and yelled "[Expletive]! Change-up!" Dr. Mathews got the out — but oh, did that ever hurt.

Now he'd like to learn to play electric guitar — "I want to rattle the Sheetrock off my house" — and improve his photography skills. He also plans to be married in July to Dr. Katherine Crabill.

In the meantime, the lecture team looks to at least one more trip together — but this one will be all pleasure, to Turkey in 2010, with their wives.

"We truly are great friends," says Dr. Spear.

Looking back, Dr. O'Connor says, "I didn't care whether they were friends or not — I just wanted the best in the field at that time. My statement to them was 'You have to be open to change.' They had to buy into that. And they did."

"Their influence across the country is just amazing." ■