

Future of our profession

Presented by Vincent G. Kokich, Northern Region Editor

The future of our profession: Will we have one?

Gloom and doom! The dental profession is deteriorating! What will the future bring? Dentists today are being bombarded with comments and questions such as these. Are these perceptions of dentistry's future accurate? According to Dr. Art Dugoni, the death of the profession of dentistry has been greatly exaggerated. Dr. Dugoni is presently Dean of the School of Dentistry at the University of the Pacific in San Francisco. In this capacity he is well aware of past and present manpower needs, the economic situation in dentistry, and the future demands that must be met by the dental profession and dental education. At the recent annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Society of Orthodontists, he shared his perception of dentistry's future with those in attendance.

In the mid 1970's, optimism was strong in dentistry. In 1975, 16,000 applicants were competing for 5,700 first year positions in United States dental schools. Dentistry was being exalted as a great profession. Young people were entering the profession with enthusiasm. Then, in the early 1980's, gloom, doom, and pessimism began to prevail. About 20,000 of the 12 million new college freshmen were considering dentistry as a profession. Today as seniors, only about 7,000 are actually applying to dental schools. What has caused this pessimistic attitude toward the profession?

According to Dr. Dugoni, three things occurred simultaneously around 1980 which affected public opinion about dentistry. First, the United States economy was in a recession and the ripple effect had reached to dental practices throughout the country: dentists were not busy. Meanwhile, the number of graduating dental students reached an all time high, and a record number of students (6,301) enrolled as freshmen in

dental schools. Superimposed upon this was the realization that 35% of the children from 5 to 17 years of age were caries free. As a result, the profession and potential students began to doubt the future security and stability that dentistry had enjoyed for so many years.

Is there reason for concern? Are these perceptions about dentistry's future true? In order to answer these questions, Dr. Dugoni evaluated the following aspects: manpower, economic situation, future demands, disease patterns, and the future of education.

Manpower

From 1970 to 1978, according to Dr. Dugoni, there was a 38% increase in first year dental students. The number of graduates reached an all time high in 1983, with 5,756 students graduating from United States dental schools. In 1984 this total declined to 5,337, the lowest number of graduates in four years. 1984 also saw the lowest total enrollment in dental schools in the last 10 years and the lowest first year class size in the last 14 years. In 1985 there will be 4,800 first year students in dental schools. This represents a 24% reduction or the equivalent of closing about 15 dental schools. What will be the effect of these reductions on the future manpower issue?

In 1984, the Department of Health and Human Services reported to President Reagan that although other health professions will have excess numbers of practitioners by the year 2000, there would be a shortage of 4,000 dentists. A similar conclusion was reached by the councils and agencies of the American Dental Association. This group evaluated several different parameters to predict future manpower needs. After looking at age of practitioners, retirement, numbers of dental students, and disease patterns, they concluded that the system would reach a balance between the number of practitioners and the demand for care between 1995 and 2000.

Presented by Art Dugoni, DDS, MSD at the PCSO Annual Meeting October 21, 1985 in San Diego, California. Dr. Dugoni is an orthodontist and is currently Dean of the School of Dentistry at the University of the Pacific in San Francisco, California.

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Dr. Art Dugoni

Orthodontists will have a bright future if they are willing to change.

Economic situation

In 1982, 19.5 billion dollars were spent on dental care in the United States. In 1985, a projected \$27.3 billion will be spent on various types of dental treatment. During the 15 year period between 1967 and 1982, the portion of the real gross national product that relates to dentistry increased by more than 47%. Extensive longterm studies of the relationship of dentistry and the constant gross national product reveal that dentistry is a growth industry.

What about the effect of insurance on the delivery of dental care? In 1965, only 1% of dental patients in the United States had dental insurance. In 1983, that number skyrocketed to 87 million people, and in 1990, it is estimated that over 105 million Americans will enjoy the benefits of dental insurance. A recent study estimated that about 47% of the average practitioner's patients have dental insurance. Dr. Dugoni believes that this figure would probably be higher if it included those patients that are paid directly by their insurance companies. Dental insurance has truly had a positive effect on the delivery of dental care in the United States. According to Dr. Dugoni, these figures and statistics are not the reflection of a gloom and doom profession.

Future demands

As all dentists are readily aware, dental disease patterns are changing. National prevalence studies have shown that 51% of today's 9-year old children are caries free. However, only 27% of 12-year olds and 12% of 16-year olds have no evidence of dental decay. These studies have also shown that 25% of the children in this country still have a high decay rate. So although the decay rate has been reduced, there will still be a need for restorative dentistry in the future.

How about the future needs of the adult population? According to statistics presented by Dr. Dugoni, in the year 2000, there will be 52 million more people between the ages of 18 and 74 with teeth. The population over 65 will represent 30 million people by the year 1990. The baby boomer segment of our population (25 to 40 years of age now) will represent 35% of the total US population by the year 1990. And this group of adults will have an extremely high buying power.

What are the future needs for orthodontics? A recent study quoted by Dr. Dugoni showed that two-thirds of the pre-adolescent population needs orthodontic treatment. In addition, the study found that 75% of the adolescent population needs orthodontic care. Although