

Portrait of a Professional

DR. GREGORY J. KING, DMD, DMSc

Professor and Chairman, Department of Orthodontics, School of Dentistry, U. of Washington

By Dr. Bruce Hawley, Northern Region Editor, and Paula Tevis

Phase I

If it weren't for those pesky fruit flies, Dr. Gregory King might never have discovered orthodontics. The 54-year-old, New Hampshire native entered Brown University as an undergraduate with the intention of becoming a geneticist. His timing, however, was a decade or two off. "Back then, genetics wasn't the exciting, innovative area that it is today," said Dr. King in a recent interview. "Most of what I was exposed to was fruit flies. Late in my senior year I decided that being a fruit fly geneticist was really not something I wanted to do with my life. So I started thinking more in terms of clinical kinds of things and that's when I decided to go to dental school."

After graduating from Brown with a degree in biology in 1965, Dr. King entered Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. At the time, he remembers being attracted to dentistry because it involved working with people in what he believed was a generally positive clinical experience. At least one of his youthful assumptions proved somewhat incorrect. "After being exposed to dental patients, I became aware that many people don't have very positive experiences," he recalled with a laugh. "I think that's one of the really nice things about orthodontics. More people have positive experiences with orthodontics than with other forms of dentistry."

While a student at Tufts, Greg also worked as a lab technician at the Massachusetts Institute of



Greg and Pat King, 1997

Technology. The lab was involved with dental caries research, and it was there that he realized his passion for science would be compatible with a future in dentistry. "Prior to that time most of my exposure to dentistry was as a dental student doing treatments and things," he said. "I wasn't too much aware of all the science that was going on in dentistry."

He had yet to make the shift to orthodontics, however. That happened after graduation and a two-year stint in the semi-real

world of the army. Dr. King was stationed at Fort Knox in Kentucky practicing general and restorative dentistry on his fellow recruits. Harkening back to the fruit flies, he didn't find the work very thrilling, but it did propel him toward the decision to specialize in orthodontia.

He applied to Harvard University, which offered an orthodontic program tailor-made to Dr. King's dual interests. Incorporating both science and clinical training, it was designed specifically for people heading for academic careers. "From the time I started at Harvard I wanted to go into academia. I never had any doubts. I don't know whether it's temperament or being lucky enough to be in good environments where I maintained excitement about what I was doing," he said.

With a doctorate in oral biology in hand, he joined the faculty of the College of Dentistry at the University of Florida in Gainesville as an assistant professor of orthodontics. Awarded tenure in 1981,



Top: The King family: Caroline, Greg, Pat and Jeffrey, 1990.
Right: Greg in high school, 1961.



Dr. King became department chairman the following year.

RATS AND RESEARCH

Clinical research has always been a driving force for Dr. King. During his years in Florida, he was involved with two studies to which he continues to contribute. The first, which investigates the relationships between mechanical situations and how the tissues respond to them, attempts to answer the question, what happens if you reactivate appliances more often or less often? Thus far, he has discovered you get very different responses.

As Dr. King explains, "The work seems to suggest that if you can extrapolate from rats, which are our model—and it's not easy to do this—and assuming that humans are very similar, it suggests to me that seeing patients once a month might be too frequent. We might get lots quicker and smoother tooth movement if we activated our appliances less frequently." The scientist in him points out that adjustments are generally

handled on a month-to-month basis due to tradition, not to any kind of a biological basis. It's a line of

research he's been following throughout his career, and one he hopes to work out in more depth.

The second area involves a large, ongoing clinical study that looks at the effectiveness of early treatment for Class II patients versus waiting until the teen years. While he still collaborates on the study and participates in meetings, Dr. King readily admits that he misses working on the project as intimately as he once did.

Realizing that research is only part of the picture, Dr. King also handled an intramural clinical practice on the Gainesville campus. Over the years, he watched as the client population changed from being primarily adolescents to including people of every age. He even had the opportunity to provide orthodontic treatment for his wife, Pat.

PHASE II

Two years ago, Dr. King began to reassess his position. His two children were grown and on their own and Pat, an attorney, had ended her legal practice. And, after two decades in Gainesville, he'd reached the point where the end of his career appeared a lot closer than the beginning.

"I enjoyed being an orthodontic department chair immensely,

but I think I was at the point in Florida where all the things that I could do, I had done," Dr. King said in an interview conducted at the end of 1996. "I was saying, well, maybe I've reached the end of the trail as far as being chairman. I was thinking very seriously of stepping down and just becoming a faculty member in the department."

Then, despite years of shrugging off calls from academic recruiters, the University of Washington in Seattle beckoned. The timing couldn't have been better.

"I felt fairly happy and fulfilled [in Florida]," he recalled. "I certainly liked living there, my kids liked living there, so it would have been very difficult for me to move. When the Washington job opened up, there was a lot different in my life. I noticed when I came here that this was a very different environment educationally and careerwise. The excitement came back almost instantaneously."

Since arriving in Seattle, Dr. King has simultaneously worked on a complicated grant proposal, managed to keep prized faculty members from leaving the fold, recruited some new faculty, and kept up an active lecture calendar that took him to Spain, Bogota, Columbia, and around the United States in the past 12 months. He's happily looking forward to a less hectic travel schedule, now that he's satisfied people's curiosity about the new UofW department chair. ■