

Future Excellence – Everyone's Responsibility

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How many times have you been told, "Change is hard"? Nowadays, it has become cliché and using that phrase risks turning off an audience. But, consider the following, "Change is hard, and triple change is exponentially harder." I'm taking the risk that this phrase might keep you reading for at least a few lines. There are major areas in dentistry that are undergoing vast changes and the seasoned members of the profession must continue to look for ways to proactively engage them.

Last fall, I was sitting in the American Dental Association's House of Delegates amid a sea of gray and balding male heads. Oh yes, there was a sprinkling of others throughout, but the clear majority fit the description of aging white male. During the Executive Director's comments to the House, Dr. Kathleen O'Loughlin encouraged us all to look for ways to effectively engage the other growing demographics of our profession. To me, that means we need to figure out how to mentor young dentists so that the profession can benefit from their participation in the years ahead. Perhaps there was no other time in the history of organized dentistry or dental academies when this was of more impact than it is now. The people, the very face of dentistry is changing. Yes, there are still the dental families where third and fourth generations enter the profession, but there are growing numbers of women, African-American, Arabic, Asian, Hispanic and others among new graduates who call themselves dentists. This is significant change. We need to learn how to reach out and mentor this diverse group.

Furthermore, this changing demographic is embedded in a time of dramatic educational change. Increasing understanding of the progression of decay and changing patient treatment needs and desires are changing what is taught in dental schools. With the loss of some of the technically demanding restorative options once taught is a threat that should concern us all. Dr. Robert Keene shared the

following quote with me. It is from Dr. Fred Eichmiller and is used with permission.

"Darwin taught us that the species that adapts best to its environment survives. Dentistry is no different. Dental education has changed and teaching of foil, castings, and to a large part clinical excellence has been lost in the process, but we can't reverse that. We need to adapt by promoting excellence outside of dental education. We all learned about 10% of the dentistry we eventually mastered in dental school, and the more valuable 90% was learned after. What has worked for promoting gold and clinical excellence has not been the influence of dental education, but rather organized study clubs. We need to promote our art through continuing education and the refinement of skills within study clubs. While I agree that it would be nice to acknowledge educators that promote gold, they are few in number and dwindling in influence. I would much rather we acknowledge those in our study clubs that are having a more profound influence on younger and newer members. What will shape the future of our profession is not better teaching institutions, but better mentors."

Finally, consider the practice environment where these new members of our profession are landing. Like it or not, many of our new practitioners are ending up in practices that look very different from those that were the mainstay of the dental profession in the twentieth century. When my father mentored me in my early years of private practice, he was mentoring me into essentially the same financial approach to running the business. But, if I would have had the educational debt commonly seen today, it would have been very difficult to do what I did; not impossible, just very difficult. Changing priorities and expectations within our graduates is forcing us to find ways to stay in touch with the new members of our profession. This is particularly difficult when corporate employers are providing continuing edu-

cation and mentoring that may be heavily influenced by their different business model.

So, what are we to do? At the core, we must continue to focus on nurturing the desire to treat our patients and our colleagues with a spirit of excellence – whether providing care or working within our professional organizations. There is no better way to nurture such a desire than to reach out and invest in a new practitioner, to encourage learning beyond what is acquired in school. Bring them to an Academy

meeting, a local dental society meeting, or invite them to your study club. Many young dentists are hungry for this. Many, even if they practice in a different environment, desire to learn and become involved on a greater scale. Obviously, mentoring in this way is not a new concept, but there are new demands being put on “the old guard” that make it more challenging. Be willing to move out of your comfort zone and be a supportive friend for those who are the changing face of dentistry. Engage them. They need you.