

Some Thoughts on Continuing Education

by Edward Feinberg, DMD

Dentistry is a profession which was originally founded on education. In the 17th and 18th centuries, quackery was rampant. The public had no way to figure out which practitioners were legitimate. As a result, the conscientious practitioners received the same bad reputation as the quacks. The only way conscientious practitioners could fight back was to *organize*. In the last century, they formed the “*Society of Surgeon Dentists of the City and State of New York*”, which later became the American Dental Association⁸. One of the first accomplishments of this organization was the passage of legislation requiring graduation from dental school as a prerequisite for dental practice.

At that time--a hundred and fifty years ago--, there was not a great deal of knowledge in the field of dentistry. Today, however, there is so much knowledge that the dental school curriculum can only provide students with a rudimentary foundation for dental practice. “The over-crowded curriculums of dental and medical schools”, explains Dr. Michael Heuer, Dean of Academic Affairs at Northwestern University, “precludes anything other than at best the attainment of “a baseline level of clinical competency at the time of graduation, even in the finest institutions”¹.

G.V. Black, widely considered to be the founder of modern dentistry, strongly believed that for dentistry to truly be a ‘learned profession’, dentists had a *moral obligation* to become a body of continuous scholars. “A professional man”, he said, “has no right to be other than a continuous student”. Why did he feel this way? Patients, he reasoned, are better served by professionals whose skills are up to date; and to keep current, dentists have to be perpetual students.

This idea of continuing education forms the very core of DSSNY, our state organization. Our *code of ethics*, which we agree to live by, is designed to “uphold and strengthen dentistry as a member of the learned professions”. Principle section two states⁵:

“The right of a dentist to professional status rests in the knowledge, skill and experience with which she/he serves her/his patients and society. Every dentist should maintain and improve her/his knowledge and skill through continuing education”.

DSSNY encourages continuing education by offering courses and by recognizing those of us who have achieved milestones in continuing education with awards and publicity.

In today’s rapidly changing world, continuing education for the practicing dentist is more critical than ever before. The pace of technological advancement has quickened to the point where some estimate that all available knowledge doubles every five years. The professional who does not keep up quickly becomes antiquated and as a result, offers patients a comparatively lower level of care. Mortimer Adler, a famous educator once

commented that², “a graduate [who] does not go on learning after school...might just as well not have gone through school at all!”

The public, which is better informed about dentistry than ever before also has higher expectations for its practitioners. Practice management consultant Pat Muchmore³ has observed that “patients receive newsletters from clinics, laboratories and obscure practitioners. They see TV celebrities interviewing experts about TMJ, bonding, bruxism appliances, dental implants and anti-cavity serum”. Patients expect their dentist to know something about these treatments, many of which were unknown during his or her years in dental school. They are likely to go elsewhere if they perceive that their dentist cannot provide them. Continuing education is therefore essential to practice growth and productivity.

Often overlooked is the idea that continuing education instills in us the enthusiasm and confidence we need to succeed. “In any area of endeavor”, says Dr. John Kennedy⁴, an Albuquerque, New Mexico practitioner, the success rate goes up with a combination of advanced training and experience. This is a self-feeding circuit. Additional education brings more success, which gives confidence, which makes the person more enthusiastic, which makes more people accept his or her services, which leads to the desire for more knowledge—and the cycle continues”. Dr. Kennedy studied 13 successful practitioners and found that all 13 had a major trait in common--they were all constant students. All also reported that they enjoyed dentistry most when they were taking continuing education courses.

The majority of dental professionals agree that continuing education is important and most *say* that they want more continuing education. The ADA’s 1992 special version Survey of Dental Practice, for example, examined the concerns of 6126 randomly selected dentists. About 62% felt that the ADA should do more to make sure that their continuing education needs are met and 85% wanted the ADA to ensure that appropriate courses are available to them.⁹ Yet attendance at courses indicates that only 10-20% of dentists not mandated to do so actually pursue continuing education. Certainly there are abundant opportunities for education—far more opportunities exist here than in any other place in the world. What is the reason for this paradox?

First is **society’s attitude toward education.** “We have entered a phase in our society”, says educator Vartan Gregorian⁶, “where education is valued for what it will *give* you rather than for what it will make out of you.” As a result, many practitioners perceive the profession to be a means to an end--a comfortable lifestyle--rather than a quest for self-fulfillment and self-improvement. Teachers in this country are often looked down on because they don’t have what society considers important--wealth and status. For too many the process of learning is drudgery. The entire educational system from first grade upward encourages learning for the achievement of grades, not for the desire to gain knowledge. After the tests are over, the material learned may be quickly forgotten. Continuing education, however, does not depend on grades. It depends on the individual’s passion for learning, self discipline and desire for self-improvement.

A second reason why more dentists don't participate in continuing education activities is a **negative dental school experience**. Almost *all* dentists have stories to tell about unpleasant experiences in the dental schools. It seems as if too many teachers exercise their frustrations on students and prevent them from making the most of their education. Under these conditions, students get "turned off", fulfilling the minimum requirements just to get by. "When people become adults psychologically", explains Dr. Edward Barrett of the University of Detroit School of Dentistry⁷, they perceive themselves as being entirely self-directed. They resist learning in situations where they do not feel respected. Indeed the memories of a similar situation in a dental school classroom or laboratory can present a serious barrier, preventing some dentists from becoming involved in continuing education activities".

Lastly, **continuing education requires sacrifice**. Continuing education comes with a price--the price of the courses, the loss of income as a result of time spent away from the office, the sacrifice of free time spent with family or in the pursuit of other interests, and the self-discipline of studying and applying the learned material. Many new dentists, who have debts upon graduation of between \$50,000 to \$100,000 forgo continuing education because they are forced to concentrate on making money to pay these debts. Paradoxically, these are the individuals who need continuing education the most--their skills are basic at best. When they are finally free to pursue their continuing education, they are no longer in the habit of taking courses!

Because such a low percentage of practitioners utilize continuing education opportunities, mandated continuing education has become inevitable. More than 30 states already require courses for relicensure, and New York state is among them. In this jurisdiction, two courses--in infection control and in child abuse detection--are the current prerequisites for license renewal. Additional prerequisites are likely in the future as an increasingly litigious public demands that we possess an adequate level of competency.

It is important for those of us who have been lax about improving our knowledge and skills to re-examine what the *real* benefit of continuing education is. It is not that piece of paper which confers eligibility for relicensure. It is the opportunity to make the most of our potential and become the best that we can possibly be. Striving to reach our potential is what gives life special meaning and makes it worth living. An investment in knowledge is ultimately an investment in ourselves. And, as Benjamin Franklin once remarked, "an investment in knowledge always pays the best interest".

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3. Muchmore, Pat; "The Case of the Missing Patients"; Dental Economics; May, 1988.

4. Kennedy, Dr. John L.; “Enthusiasm and Confidence play a Major Role”; Dental Economics, August, 1989.
5. Council on Ethics; Dental Society of the State of New York; Code of Ethics; revised December, 1993.
6. Moyers, Bill; “Vartan Gregorian, Educator” [an interview]; A World of Ideas; Doubleday; 1989.
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