

Another Golden Age

Throughout my more than 30 years in dentistry, I have witnessed the “Golden Age” of dentistry and the “Dark Days” of the same profession. Experience shows that these highs and lows may cycle rather quickly. Fortunately we are finding our profession in another positive cycle, as new dental schools are opening, applications are increasing, patient demand is high, and remuneration for the provided care is proportionate to the effort involved. Couple this with a global economy that is relatively strong, and we can see that the profession is doing well.

My interpretation is that this upturn is driven by a general desire on the part of patients for a natural dentition. The profession works to achieve this desire through a few different paths. Therapy is provided to maintain what exists, restore what is missing, or enhance what nature, or the dentist, provided. The concerns of the dentist must be compatible with both the subjective desires of the patient and his or her objective needs. The dentist should not be paternalistic relative to therapeutic options but should instead function as a team member to achieve patient desires while also meeting patient needs. Success therefore is dependent upon our ability to please both the patient and ourselves. Two disciplines have developed over the last few decades to assist in meeting these desires and needs: implant and cosmetic dentistry. Although at one time distinct, these disciplines have merged as valuable tools to assist in meeting treatment goals.

It is interesting that, while dentistry is flourishing, our colleagues in medicine are having an entirely different experience. The profession of medicine has always been, and continues to be, an attractive one. Traditionally colleges sent their best and brightest to medical school because the career was interesting, challenging, and financially stable. The first 2 classic descriptors of the medical profession, “interesting” and “challenging,” remain valid. However, today’s student sees distinct financial differences between a career in dentistry and a career in medicine. Both professions remain financially rewarding, but most physicians achieve those rewards through an 80-hour work week, in contrast to their dental colleagues, who accomplish similar income levels in half the time. This allows those in the dental profession to enjoy the fruits of their labors, while those in the medical pro-

fession simply labor on. Perhaps this recognition is responsible for a downward shift in medical school applications.

This situation has also contributed to the dental profession’s “Golden Age.” We are experiencing an increasing demand for positions in our schools. This allows the profession to be increasingly selective when choosing new students. The incoming classes in most dental schools have higher grade point averages and admissions test scores than we have seen in years. These highly qualified applicants are also quite choosy when considering the schools they are willing to attend. Dental schools now aggressively market themselves, touting their unique characteristics and training programs. This includes offerings in the field of implant dentistry.

In contrast to medicine, dentistry is dependent on clinical skills. A physician can, depending upon the specialty, rely on intellectual knowledge entirely; however, dentists are always involved in therapeutic intervention provided through the work of their own hands. Our bounty of intellectually gifted students does not ensure that these individuals will also be clinically gifted. This situation is being addressed by many of the new developments in implant dentistry. If we look carefully at this discipline, we are beginning to see efforts that are more cognitively based. In fact, in most instances, pretreatment planning is the most critical aspect of successful implant therapy. Certainly clinical skills are necessary to implement the plan, but before those clinical skills are employed, the intellectual efforts of the clinician are used to determine the likelihood of success.

The big picture of dentistry is one that encourages optimism. The discipline of implant dentistry in particular allows practitioners to utilize their cognitive and interventional skill sets to meet the needs and desires of patients. This being the case, the current “Golden Age” should continue for quite a long time.



Steven E. Eckert, DDS, MS
Editor-in-Chief