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THE EDITOR'S CORNER

He That Tooteth Not His Own Horn

Over the past few years, I have had opportunities to visit dentists in places all over the globe—from exciting and unpredictable Rio de Janeiro to stable and structured Singapore; from dynamic and traffic-choked Seoul, Korea, to pastoral and rural Medellín, Colombia; from the most populous city in the world, Mexico City, to pristine and underpopulated New Zealand; from spectacular Hong Kong to sophisticated Sydney, Australia. What has impressed me most about dentistry in these different locations, with their diverse political and health-care systems, is dentists' common passion for improving the oral health of their patients. We may belong to the only profession on earth that is actively trying to work itself out of a job.

In our quest to control dental disease, we have spent our own money, along with that of our governments and many commercial manufacturers, to develop fluoridated water supplies, protective toothpastes, dental sealants, oral-hygiene instruments, and techniques for periodic dental checkups. Now we have embarked upon the even more challenging problem of understanding and controlling periodontal disease, and I believe that within our lifetimes, we will see almost unbelievable advances in this field as well. In orthodontics, we are pursuing interceptive techniques that may reduce the need for more extensive and costly treatments later in life.

Safeguarding patients' health has always been the primary consideration of conscientious dentists, who have discharged their responsibility with exceptional integrity and a minimum of supervision or regulation from state and federal agencies. In the United States, we have a population with remarkably healthy mouths that are the envy of the world.

We have done all this while simultaneously increasing our efficiency and lowering the cost of our services. In 1952, it cost the ordinary U.S. worker about 432 hours of labor to purchase orthodontic treatment for a child. In 1997, that parent will work only 279 hours to purchase orthodontic treatment, which, by the way, is much less

discomforting and demanding for the patient. Contrast that with the cost of a bachelor's degree at an American university, which now requires the average laborer to work three times longer in 1997 than in 1952 to pay for a product that is probably inferior and often takes longer to acquire. Or compare it to a single-family home, which cost 6,528 hours of work in 1952 and today costs 10,480 hours. Dentists have done a remarkable job of extending their services to an ever-growing population at affordable fees.

This is sensational news, but the American general public, media opinion-makers, and political leaders seem not to know or care about it. Consequently, we still find ourselves targets of ridicule and censure for writers, comedians, and politicians who really should know better. Rather than proclaiming the news in a proactive way, we react timidly and apologetically to accusations of widespread professional neglect in areas such as the Acer AIDS infections, instrument sterilization, contamination of vacuum lines, and, now, the use of recycled brackets.

I have often invoked a Biblical paraphrase

that says, "He that tooteth not his own horn, the same shall not be tooted." A friend once answered with a corollary, "He that tooteth his own horn shall soon run down his battery." But the point I want to make is that we are part of a marvelous profession that is still improving by quantum leaps, and we need to inform the public of our achievements in unmistakable terms that will help them understand how they benefit from all that we do.

I love being a dentist, and I know you do, too, or you wouldn't even be reading this. Whether the public ever gives us full credit, we will continue to move toward the goal of a toothache-free populace with ready and natural smiles. Our efforts may not be revolutionary enough for our self-appointed watchdogs in the media, bureaucracies, and politics, but the facts are indisputable: Americans have the best dental health in the world, it is getting better and more affordable for more people every year, and dentists need make no apologies for this to anyone.

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