

## Dental Isolation in the Younger Generation

The future of dentistry and the quality of dental treatment afforded by our profession are dependent on the commitment to dentistry that is made by each successive generation of dentists. For many years, dentistry has enjoyed a remarkably high level of dentist involvement, not only in continuing education activities, but also, and most importantly, in professional organizations. By comparison to medicine, where a very low proportion of physicians are members of the American Medical Association, a very high proportion of dentists have historically been members of their flagship organization, the American Dental Association. Commendably, dentists historically have been very active in their profession, ranging from membership and service in local dental societies and study clubs to support for and membership in national and international dental organizations. Advocacy benefits (representing and promoting the dental profession in various legislative or regulatory groups) are only attainable when our professional organizations truly represent a high percentage of dentist members. Individuals alone cannot effectively accomplish this objective independently.

However, a growing concern exists. It appears that younger dentists are increasingly less involved in the maintenance and promotion of our profession and are becoming more isolated from their profession. This perception is shared by many of my colleagues around the country with whom I have spoken. Not only are younger dentists less involved in traditional continuing education offerings, but also, they simply are not as involved in organized dentistry as a whole.

How and why is this occurring? First and foremost, younger dentists have been conditioned throughout their lives to be more self-directed and self-reliant. Access to information has never been easier owing to the age of the internet, online search engines, and unlimited access to sources of information heretofore not even imagined. As I have noted in a previous Perspectives feature, the meteoric rise in the capabilities

of the internet and social media has indeed been “game changers.” Significant time is now spent by younger dentists generating up-to-date, attractive web pages, a notable presence on Facebook, and of course, active participation on Twitter.

It is also understandable that economic pressures have contributed to the declining involvement in organized dentistry and CE. Increasing financial concerns, made worse by elevating residual costs of education and a poor general economy, also likely have limited the younger dentists’ interest and participation in dues-funded organizations and tuition-based CE courses. But what perhaps is worse are the observations of many of my colleagues that because of these elevated financial concerns, younger dentists all too often view their fellow dentists more as competitors than colleagues, possibly accounting for the increased focus on marketing and advertising as well.

Communication means are also becoming more and more impersonal due to the high-tech nature of these technologies. Communication between and among professional colleagues is increasingly through impersonal text messages, emails, or Twitter tweets. Continuing education information and credits also can be easily attained through impersonal online webinars, subscription courses, and even self-assessment quizzes offered by journals and other publications, rendering conventional CE approaches “old-fashioned.” Even in dental education, we are being told that traditional lectures with face-to-face interaction are becoming outdated and passé. The unintended but inevitable result of such radical changes is unfortunately dental isolationism.

Dentistry needs face-to-face professional interaction and personal involvement. Those of us who have been part of dentistry for many years must make the effort to educate our younger colleagues about the benefits of personal collegiality and professional involvement. Regardless of the perceived merits of internet-based

information and the incredible capacities of the digital age, there is no substitute for having professional friends and mentors. Only colleagues can provide empathy, support, and professional guidance. Only personal interactions can foster meaningful professional relationships that result in improved patient care.

We also cannot afford to allow our younger colleagues to become so absorbed in self-reliance as individuals that we lose our collective cohesiveness as a profession. Dentistry has thrived over the years largely because of the manner in which we have united as colleagues to protect the common interests and aspirations of our profession. Dentistry has benefited from countless individuals whose selfless service to the profession through their involvement in professional organizations has benefited us all. Professional interaction for the

betterment of our profession is not only desirable, it is essential. We cannot afford to lose a generation of younger, uninvolved dentists to cynicism spawned by self-reliance and an overriding concern for personal economic preservation. We must pursue every avenue available to involve our younger generation in organized dentistry: our ethical commitments to one another as colleagues warrant it, our patients deserve it, and our very existence as a profession demands it.

**Harald O. Heymann, DDS, MEd, Editor-in-Chief**

---

Reprint requests: Harald O. Heymann, DDS, MEd, Editor-in-Chief, UNC School of Dentistry, Department of Operative Dentistry, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7450, USA; Tel.: 919-843-9744; Fax: 919-966-5660; email: harald\_heyman@dentistry.unc.edu

Copyright of Journal of Esthetic & Restorative Dentistry is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.