



The Dental Research Agenda: What's Important to the Practitioner?

Dental research in the U. S. is conducted by a number of public and private organizations, schools, agencies, and corporations. As practicing dentists, we should be interested in how their research agendas are developed. Among the communities of interest that influence the nature of dental research is the American Dental Association (ADA), which recently came forth with its 2006-2007 research agenda, "Research of Importance to the Practicing Dentist."¹ Because this document represents organized dentistry's prioritization of research issues of importance to the practitioner, it is worthy of review. The goals expressed in the agenda will be those that the ADA will promote and facilitate over the coming years. Will they have an impact on your practice and treatment of children?

The research agenda consists of 4 broad goals that will be in place for the next 2-3 years. Each goal carries 1 or more objectives that serve to narrow its focus; the objectives will change yearly. The first goal relates to an understanding of the determinants (biological, social, behavioral) of oral and dental diseases and their impact on how we deliver dental care. This year's objective speaks to the application of risk assessment and management strategies on oral health outcomes. Pediatric dentists and some general practitioners have been using caries risk assessment tests for several years now and have to be considered leaders in the use of these instruments. How well do they work? Do they truly enable us to identify at-risk children? How should we use the information from a risk assessment to best benefit our patients? Some preliminary studies have been undertaken, and more are needed.

Goal 2 addresses the outcomes of elective dental procedures provided at different ages, and the objective for 2006-07 is to evaluate the outcome of third molar extraction in different age groups. This specific objective may be of interest to those of us who treat adolescents through the high school years, but I suspect that it is not of immediate importance to most pediatric dentists. What other elective procedures do you provide that should be considered as a possible objective under this goal in future years?

The third goal is "to understand the scientific basis of emerging issues" that impact practitioners. The two objectives for this goal have some immediate application to pediatric dentistry. The first deals with the post-operative complications seen in patients who are taking bisphosphonates. While use of these drugs is uncommon among children, they are being used to treat osteogenesis imperfecta and bone metastases, and thus may impact the care

of children in our practices with certain special health care needs. Objective 2 addresses the oral-systemic connection, a topic I addressed in my editorial in the previous issue of this journal. Research sparked by either of these objectives should benefit our care of children.

The final goal deals with evidence-based dentistry, which happens to be current AAPD President Phil Hunke's area of emphasis for 2006-07, so the Academy is helping to lead the way on this issue. The first objective concerns effective ways of disseminating and implementing scientific evidence into private practice. AAPD certainly strives to do this through its publications, annual session, and other means, but clearly further efforts are needed to put the current best evidence into practitioners' hands. The second objective addresses the development of practice-based research networks to investigate clinically-relevant problems. This model of research is being used effectively in primary care medicine, but has had limited success in dentistry. It's time to revisit the concept with focused research questions that will enhance the likelihood of achieving outcome data that are useful to our members.

Research in the areas promoted by the ADA document could benefit our patients by bringing clinically-relevant information to our practices. We should support its goals and promote them within and outside of our Academy as a means of driving the research agendas of those who support and conduct dental research, including faculty and residents in our advanced education programs.

Reference

1. American Dental Association. Research Agenda. Available at: "<http://www.ada.org/prof/resources/positions/research.asp>". Accessed October 11, 2006.

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