

FUTURE OF DENTISTRY

Competence now and in the future



BACKGROUND

Change is the difficult but constant way of life for most everyone, but it should be viewed as not only moving beyond the past but also as opening opportunities and challenges so that growth is possible. Dentistry is at a crossroads and faces immense challenges moving forward.

ORAL HEALTH AND MEDICINE

A trend has been underway to incorporate more medicine into dentistry. Now it's important to move oral health into medical areas. The move will require the leadership of the dental and the medical professions, their educational systems, and individual oral health care professionals. Recently oral health was included in the Noncommunicable Disease Alliance framework, which recognizes the shared risk factors among many common systemic chronic diseases and oral diseases and conditions. Oral health care practitioners must be seen as relevant to the attainment of overall health and well-being to be accepted as primary health care professionals who can make a difference in patient care.

A NEW DEFINITION

The FDI World Dental Federation General Assembly in 2016 adopted a new definition of oral health that challenges the traditional dimension of oral health. Rather than being limited to a focus on the presence or absence of disease, the new definition focuses more holistically, including physiological status and psychosocial function. Rather than treating a disease, the emphasis is now on treating a patient with a disease.

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM CHANGES

The ability to measure oral health improvement fits well within the concept of a value-based health care paradigm in medicine. However, for further growth, significant changes to the educational system, including continuing education offerings after graduation, will be required. Competence must be regarded not just as a prerequisite for graduation but as a lifelong pursuit for professionals.

Current equipment and materials are vastly better than in the past, enabling oral health care practitioners to perform many more advanced procedures than in the past. To be truly useful, however, the practitioner must also undergo constant upgrades in terms of scholarly expertise. Oral health care professionals must be able to discern which research is valuable for patient treatment and which isn't and then apply it in practice. This requires combing through a vast library of articles and relies on the ability to discern value in the research presented. Thus dental educators must not only ensure their graduates are competent, but also ensure that they are able to continue their competence 30 years into the future. Dental students and practicing dentists require training in how to think more critically. Today there is a tsunami of information readily available to practitioners; the challenge is to be able to correctly and objectively understand what has been published and its relevance for patient care and procedural excellence. The American Dental Association's Center for Evidence-Based Dentistry and JADA Clinical Scans can be useful in evaluating and assessing the evidence that is available.

Clinical Significance

It is vital that dental professionals embrace the tools that will help them critically appraise the vast amount of scientific evidence now available so that they can keep up with the swift growth in biomedical fields. Significant transformation will sometimes be needed to bring dental practice into the mainstream of patient treatment. Moving forward will present opportunities and challenges, and dental professionals must be prepared to succeed when faced with these daunting obstacles.

Glick M: Dentistry at a crossroads. *J Am Dent Assoc* 149:565-566, 2018

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