

Harmony in orthodontics

Eric L. Dellinger

Angola, Ind

It is not uncommon in fairy tales to have an adversary who threatens to eat the hero of the story. Indeed, “Little Red Riding Hood” has no thrill if the Big Bad Wolf fails to eat Grandma (OK, spoiler: our heroine is safe in the end). Hansel and Gretel have no threat if the Witch turns out to be vegetarian. Great heroes seem to require great villains in children’s stories. The dichotomy of good against evil frames these dramas and makes them easy to recall. They invite us to be strong, truthful, brave, and otherwise virtuous in the face of dramatic adversity.

Interestingly, we are faced with a dramatic adversity in orthodontics today. The technology of computer-bent wires, computer-made aligner trays, and computer-generated treatment planning all present a viciously different paradigm of our skills relative to the orthodontist as a supreme wire bender. Indeed, when all the bending can be done without the need for pliers in the office, it would seem that some of the defining modalities of our specialty are patently archaic.

Because of this change in the definition of “orthodontist,” the American Board of Orthodontics (ABO) has wisely modified the testing procedure to become a board-certified orthodontist. Beginning in 2019, candidates will be asked to evaluate a uniform set of treatment records, answer standardized questions related to those records, and provide a viable treatment and alternate treatment for the given malocclusion. The testing will be “scenario based,” in line with the evidence-based teaching methods currently used in American Dental Association–approved orthodontic programs and similar to the techniques used by other specialty boards in dentistry and medicine. The candidate’s analysis of complex subjects and critical thinking abilities will be assessed. This method is considered to be the most valid, reliable, and fair method currently available to assess proficiency relative to standards determined by experts. At this time, this method of testing is the most harmonious method of evaluating orthodontic skill that is available.

Throughout its history, the ABO has attempted to adapt the examination to the applicant’s needs by reducing or eliminating barriers to the examination process. As a result, the percentage of board-certified orthodontists has fluctuated over the decades. When barriers were removed, the percentage increased. The College of Diplomates was formed in 1979 specifically to counteract this problem of decreasing passing rates, and we are challenged to continue to increase board certification and to educate the board-certified orthodontist even today.

Since the inception of the original board certification tests, detractors have complained that the board is “not fair,” that it is “too biased toward researchers” or “too biased toward clinicians.” Even so, every generation has seen clinicians who seek to continue their education in orthodontics and achieve board certification. Recently graduated practitioners see education in a different light than previous generations. One can imagine attending an American Association of Orthodontists meeting and seeing only plaster models set on a table. The lack of slides or Powerpoint presentations would be off-putting at best, and the message of the presentation could be lost in the translation of learning methods. Because modern education requires computer information and interactive communication, the current ABO test seeks to incorporate these modern methods of information and evaluation.

There will undoubtedly be complaints from older practitioners that the new methods are “too easy” or “too simple.” Perhaps some will complain that the testing methods do not adequately ensure the excellence of the doctor being tested. In this regard I am reminded of my first truck. It had no radio, no air conditioning, no anti-lock braking system, no traction control, a manual gearbox, and a manual choke. My children have much more comfortable and safe vehicles, and I would never wish my old truck upon them. It would be irrelevant for them to take a driver test with the old truck, they will never have to drive such a vehicle. In the same way, we as a profession must embrace progress and understand that the methods we were taught with (remember chalk and blackboards?) are no longer relevant.

As parents, we are responsible for the growth of our children and their continued success after our time

here is done. In the same way, our profession requires us to ensure that the specialty of orthodontics survives the transition to computer-driven care. We must encourage our younger members to become board certified, and all of us should strive for consistent continuing education. This is the very mission of the College.

The College of Diplomates of the American Board of Orthodontics serves its members in their pursuit of excellence in orthodontic care by enhancing the knowledge and skills of orthodontists, advocating board certification, and educating the public and

dental community on the merits of board certification by the American Board of Orthodontics.

In this regard, let us work to achieve harmony within our profession, as well as within our patients' treatments. When we are working with new colleagues, please let us be encouraging in all of the above. When we hear the arrogance of "the old way was the best way," please encourage the old to recall when they were young. Let's all endeavor to treat all of our colleagues with respect and encouragement. A fable never ended happily if the children were eaten.