

Is the end in sight?

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You've finally received your orthodontics certificate. The first position you accept involves a reimbursement scale that is based on your level of production. The more cases you start, the more money you'll make. That's a necessity in beginning the rest of your life, including finally owning your own home and starting a family. Production is essential to pay off those educational loans, which total more than a half-million dollars. It's a monumental amount, considering that you and your fiancé have already waited 3 years to get married because a wedding was out of the question while you were in school. You've now learned that he'll also need a car to travel 45 miles to work each day—another added expense.

As you start work, you wonder how you'll be able to make ends meet. The principal on your loans is steep enough, but the interest alone is crippling your family budget. You are delighted and fulfilled to be an orthodontist, but you wonder if you will ever be able to pull yourself out of debt.

The financial approach of the majority of orthodontic education programs is worthy of mention. The income for most schools is derived from tuition from residents, who are predominantly supported by loans, grants, and scholarships. Additional revenue for the schools is earned by patient care provided by those residents. Six to 8 hours a day for 5 days a week engrossed in patient care is a common commitment. Clinical experience is generated by hands-on patient treatment, with the school collecting reimbursement via fee-for-service or third-party payment.

The proceeds earned from these combined sources is channeled to the school's capital improvements, grants to deserving students and residents, fixed overhead costs, and faculty remuneration. Although most clinical teaching is generated from part-time volunteers who receive minimal compensation at best, one often wonders where the substantial funds collected from tuition and patient care go.

It appears that orthodontics is not the only profession subjected to such mysteries. Aspiring cosmetologists and hairstylists who are equally enamored with their careers

also attend programs that coincidentally collect high tuition and realize fees from students who represent a captive labor force.¹ Cosmetology graduates are overwhelmed by not only their educational loans, but also by ballooning interest rates associated with these loans. And although cosmetologists earn much less than orthodontists, the relative debt compared to earning power in both groups makes loan repayment almost insurmountable. One hairstylist experienced a 5-year increase in debt from \$22,000 to \$29,000, merely due to the fluctuating interest rates on her loan. In analogous fashion, a young orthodontist found himself in debt of more than 1 million dollars after his education concluded. Given the fact that there is no limit on the interest rate charged on his professional school loan, his debt will likely double in 20 years.²

Potential ethical implications might evolve from this scenario. Because orthodontic treatment is elective and the patient's needs are often determined by subjective assessment, the possibility that a practitioner could recommend unwarranted treatment is a concern. It might become tempting to suggest a certain treatment plan when significant financial burdens accompany an orthodontic education—burdens that loom month after month, year after year, and decade after decade.

There is no question of the value of a dental and orthodontic education. After health, education can be considered to be an individual's greatest possession and highest accomplishment. But where will the cycle of tuition increases and ballooning interest rates end? Dental leadership might consider approaching legislators with a provision that offsets student interest rates on the colossal loans that our recent graduates accrue. And dental schools and specialty programs should seek to establish a realistic limit on a justifiable tuition level.

The success of our young graduates just might depend on it.

REFERENCES

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