

## Beyond the window: Change or wither

As the 1900s end, it is appropriate to reflect on dentistry's past, as we did last month, and also on its future. Thus, the last editorial of the 1900s will reflect your editor's opinion about opportunities for the profession in the new millennium.

Last month I listed a number of problems that I believe we should all address. I could have easily listed the numerous positive things the profession has accomplished. Dentistry is arguably the best health profession today: The doctor-patient relationship is essentially intact, patients are driven to our offices by want-based rather than need-based reasons, and the independent nature of our practices insulates us from group coercion such as medicine has suffered.

The reason I prefer to address our weaknesses is simple—I agree with the American humorist Will Rogers when he said that even when we are on the right track, if we just sit there long enough, something will run over us. The nature of progress is to strengthen our weaknesses, refine our strengths, and identify new ways to assure better oral health outcomes for our patients in particular and our communities in general. This activity is consistent with the basic professional principle of beneficence—acting in the best interest of others.

So what will the millennium bring?

Clearly the knowledge explosion will continue. We will come to understand, at the molecular level, more about the entire scope of oral disease, its processes, management, and prevention. I believe this knowledge is the single most important factor in our future. Collaborative patient care with our physician colleagues will allow us to better manage the cohorts of biologically compromised patients we will be responsible for. Those dentists who are educated in comprehensive diagnosis and management will flourish, and those who are not will find themselves further isolated from mainstream health care.

While our basic scientific knowledge pool is expanding, our restorative materials sciences develop apace. In the last two decades of the 20th century, dental materials have undergone astounding transformation from "filling" materials toward true restorative materials. Education and experience in the new restorative procedures will occupy much of our professional development time in the foreseeable future. Again, those who educate themselves will function at high levels of contemporary competence. Those who don't will remain procedure-oriented technicians.

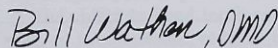
Diagnostic sciences will provide increasingly valid and predictable ways to assess the oral health status of our patients, from both imaging and laboratory test standpoints. The digitization of our offices will include access to large data pools that can be used to enhance diagnostic and predictive ability. Instant meta-analyses of evidence-based "best practices" will allow better management of the causes and courses of oral disease, all to the benefit of our patients.

Better access to information will allow patients around the world to know and understand more about the value of preventive behaviors. Our patient pool will continue to retain more teeth for longer periods of their lives, and they will continue to value their dentate status. This global demographic tendency toward better quality of life assures the continuing respect among the world's population for the dental profession and its diverse members. A fundamental challenge for the profession of tomorrow is to assure that all people have access to relief from oral pain and infection.

As we stand at the threshold of the millennium, we hold the future of our profession firmly in our collective grip. The degree to which we embrace individual responsibility will determine how well we use the advances in dental health care to benefit our patients. All change must come from a broad consensus of dentistry's members. When individual members collectively decide that change is in the best interest of our patients and our practices, the final steps to improvement begin—our associations, our regulatory agencies, and our educational institutions will change.

Thus, the future lies with each of us individually and collectively. As we better ourselves through education, our patients reap benefits. As our patients reap benefits, the value of the profession grows in the public awareness. Valuable professions are esteemed for the right reasons.

The time is right to enter a new "golden era." It is up to all of us to think beyond our own self interests as we work to assure that era.



William F. Wathen, DMD  
Editor-in-Chief