

## Looking Ahead

The new year is always a time for retrospection and re-evaluation. It is a time of hope, with the old year wiped away exposing a clean page upon which to write the future. Retrospection provides the clear vision we lacked when events were still the present and future. Retrospection is essential both for learning and for providing perspective. The course ahead often seems so strewn with obstacles, and progress appears so slow, that sometimes we must look back to recognize that progress has been made or to redefine goals that have been left unreached. The past several years certainly have been remarkable from the standpoint of political change and world progress. No one person could have predicted the magnitude of transition that has materialized. The political alliances that have evolved and the conflicts that have arisen were largely unforeseen by even the most astute observers.

Similarly, technical progress has been amazing. The hope of fusion as a new clean source of energy; the progress in genetic alteration; and the advent of virtual reality as a new electronic method for business, education, and pleasure all transcend even the mental gyrations of the science fiction writer. These marvelous surgings of the human mind are exhilarating and give hope that other such developments will solve more basic human needs.

Other aspects of retrospection are somewhat disappointing. Hoped for progress has been slow in coming, and change has been less dramatic. Although rapid advancement appears imminent, the status of prostodontics in the past decade has not changed greatly. Certainly our materials are the finest we have ever had, but there are no major differences in the basic application of most of these materials. If any one difference exists, it is the advent of implant dentistry as a sound alternative in treatment planning. It is, however, still available to too-small a segment of the population. In countries where fee-for-service is the primary method of payment, the expense is prohibitive for many who need implants most. Third party payers have not rushed forward to embrace implants as a choice of treatment; in most countries where socialization covers most costs of care, implants are restricted. Still, there has been improvement.

What concerns me most are the progressive restrictions being imposed by government and administrative nondenial personnel. The alphabet soup of governmental agencies seems more interested in self-preservation and unbridled expansion than in the mission that spawned them. No one can realistically oppose measures that seek to ensure that patients receive safe and careful therapy as long as the health care personnel are likewise protected. Yet, are all the regulations being administered with the safety of the patient and the health care team as the primary concern, or is the elevation of bureaucracy for its own sake becoming the goal? Do those who monitor do so with the desire to assist, educate, and promote positive change, or are

they merely looking to penalize and denigrate? The hostility of some of these individuals and groups is alarming. Penalty and restriction should be for the most recalcitrant, not for the cooperative. Granted, it may be difficult to ensure that laxity in compliance results from ignorance rather than from negligent indifference. However, an attitude of assistance and education would serve better than one bent on prosecution approaching persecution.

My wishes for the new year have little hope of fulfillment, but hope is still a very human quality, even in the absence of realistic potential.

I wish that the news media would return to reporting news rather than creating it, that the deeds of the good majority would be featured as often as the foibles of the evil few, and that investigative reporting would seek out the thoughts of the realistic masses rather than those of the dramatic minority.

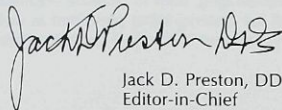
I wish that politicians would seek to serve the populace they represent rather than their own re-election or retention; those who vote for programs should be constrained to participate in them.

I look forward to the time when the legal profession will be reimbursed for swift justice and equitable settlement rather than for per-hour retention through tortuous legal maneuvering where prolonged negotiation benefits the negotiator but none of the litigants.

Perhaps government regulatory agencies will be funded in ratio to the number of positive changes they assist rather than through the fines they levy.

Then, we might not have to fight another amalgam war, to battle the advent of illogical socialization of services, to turn belly-up on malpractice litigation (even in the face of irrational prosecution), or to worry about the closure of a practice the next time an OSHA official steps through the door. These are American realities but they have been seen to spread quickly to other societies as well.

Perhaps, someday, the practice of dentistry will return to those halcyon days when serving the patient consumed the greatest amount of time and energy, and it was done friend to friend. Those were days when unreasonable documentation and legalistic regimentation were unheard of. Is such a return unlikely? Of course not. Look back through those times past when our profession knew brighter days; the memories of the paths we once walked might spur us to work with greater fervor to recreate the shadow of such times. We cannot sit idly while progressively more stringent regulations slow our progress and strangle the joys that come from willing service. This is not a time to be passive. Look back and work forward.



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