



## **PROSTHODONTICS Past, Present and Future**

Prosthodontics—a subject so broad with so little time to discuss it—should probably take its place with the age-old opening examination in Physics, that exam being “define the universe and give two examples.”

The suggested theme of “Prosthodontics: Past, Present and Future” could be better said as “Where have we been?—Where are we?—and Where are we going?” This wording, of course, stresses the “we” because prosthodontics, even though we’ve struggled time and time again with a definition for it, is really about prosthodontists—the people who built it, the people who work in it, and those who will sustain it in the future. There would be no prosthodontics were it not for these trained people, and the sooner we as trained prosthodontists define ourselves as specialists in dentistry, the better. Let’s not be bashful about calling ourselves what we are—“prosthodontists, specialists in dentistry, who do things general dentists cannot or are not trained to do.”

### **The Present**

Our present day condition, the “where are we as trained prosthodontists,” can easily be summed up in one word—Optimism! One truly has to be optimistic about where we are today. Why?

- Even though the current news paints a pessimistic view of the Social Security program as it relates to an ever-increasing aging population, we know an aging population is to our benefit. And worry not, these old timers do have money for the things they truly need and want, and the things we as specialists can better provide.
- Even though we see pessimism in the decreasing numbers of trained prosthodontists graduated or certified in relation to an increasing population, we truthfully know that such a scarcity leaves space for those of us already trained. A future crisis? Yes—but for those of us practicing now—no.

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#### Editor/Publisher Statement:

This paper has been readapted into a format for reading in the newsletter. The paper was presented at the 87th Annual Scientific Session of the Academy of Prosthodontics in Scottsdale, Arizona on May 19, 2005. As requested by the meeting’s program chairman, the paper served as an introduction to three following papers related to: (1) prosthodontic paradigms, (2) the future of dental specialties, and (3) the relationships between dentistry and dental laboratory technology.

- We see a decreasing applicant pool from US schools entering our training programs. But we know the great expansions and rapid progresses in China, India, Korea, Taiwan, and other countries that are now “developing” bring increasing numbers of eager applicants to our shores. These applicants need and want our training. We also know a continuing, vigorous global economy is creating the very conditions in their homelands that will beckon them home following our training. A dollar is a dollar and why should our deans, our states, and our dental schools care from where the dollars come? We can do better than to waste our training programs.
- We are maintaining advanced training programs that are better, longer, and much more complicated than those of the past. But we know, too, that this makes us much better able to manage the superb technical advancements at our disposal today. The appearance of materials from commercial and industrial uses has become a blessing for dentistry. The prosthodontist’s extra training gives imparts an ability to quickly find wider uses for these materials, uses that are especially unique in patients with missing tissues that cannot be restored further by surgery.

Those trained additionally in maxillofacial prosthetics have always been and continue to be on the forefront of successful material use. Dentistry and prosthodontics owes them a great debt of thanks. Those who have developed the research, knowledge, training, and disciplined clinical protocols that have led to success in implant dentistry deserve an equal recognition and thanks.

Our patients become the real benefactors of our special skills. Prosthodontists and those in maxillofacial prosthetics and implant dentistry deserve much more credit than they receive for advancing the use of new materials and techniques.

- And yes, we see a population growing without bounds on the coasts, in cities and in warm weather areas. This change in demographics puts prosthodontists at a great advantage in being in the good places where they are needed, where they truly want to be, and where all of the benefits of a specialty practice can easily be developed.

Looking at our present? Optimism is the word! We are among the most fortunate few!

## **The Past**

Most of the giants of our specialty were not giants because they were fellows in a certain academy or any other prosthodontic organization. Neither were these men great visionaries. Rather, they were men with overriding and overwhelming clinical problems needing solutions. They saw needs in their patients, but no immediate answers in the science as it existed. In the old days, they would travel, mainly by train, meeting sometimes for as long as two weeks, carrying the gear they would need to prove their techniques, even bringing their patients with them on occasion.

They gathered in their budding prosthodontic organizations and they argued and tested and talked and taught their philosophies and techniques in occlusion, tooth form, gnathology, articulator design, removable and fixed partial denture technique, overdentures—and yes, they became knowledgeable in their therapeutic mission, learning and understanding well the tissues they worked with and managed, right down to the cellular level. These exposures took these men away from general dentistry and they grew in a very special field—prosthodontics. It would be difficult to name all of these pioneers in prosthodontics, the icons of our specialty. In trying to do, so some of the greats would be forgotten. Some would not receive the credit they were due. And some, because of humility, would not want special recognition on a list of “greats.”

It should also be quickly recognized that we are now blessed with talented, smart female icons. Females, who in their own right and in their own time have made this and other disciplines of dentistry very special places. They hold their own! We have seen them grow quickly as organizers, nationally and internationally known clinicians, and holders of academic appointments—professors and associate professors, presidents of organizations, board examiners, editors, and, yes, even deans. Even though starting late, there is no limit on what these female icons will accomplish, making the specialty of prosthodontics better and better in every regard from here on out.

### **Looking to the future**

Discounting uncontrollable influences from the outside world, the specialty’s future looks entirely optimistic. Fortunately, we do not and will not have the insurmountable ethics or bioethics problems of medicine. Fortunately, we have not been plagued with lawsuits from patients. The attorneys have found fields that are more fertile elsewhere.

A great benefit in dentistry is that we routinely restore to health. Even better, we impart pleasing natural appearances and seek a function that is totally physiologic. Our special treatments result in a measurable reduction in future breakdown. The newsletter has repeatedly pointed out that specialists in prosthodontics have added these values for every dollar spent.

Fortunately, we have grown as profession separate and apart from medicine. In most circles, we continue to be identified as such. To our credit, our organization’s foundations are raising their heads and contributing more and more to scholarship assistance. Dr. Stephen Campbell’s published Research Grant and Award Program summary stated that ten prosthodontic organizations would grant close to \$50,000 dollars in 2005. This is good, but it is not great! It would be much better if this was a target for individuals. We as individuals should move advanced prosthodontic education ahead in our giving priorities. We cannot and should not avoid attending to this continuing critical need in our specialty.

Finally, best of all, we cannot “outsource” prosthodontics. Our treatments are hands-on. Delegating and outsourcing have not and will not become parts of this specialty’s strengths. All things considered, prosthodontics, as a recognized specialty, has a very bright future!

## **Future pessimism in a sea of optimism**

Peering into the future, there are two areas you will want to keep on alert:

1. In a word, “medicinizing.” To do this to our dental schools may finally eliminate dentistry as a separate profession. In doing so the word we now hear in such a progression, if indeed it is a progression, is “integration,”—an integration with medicine. In addition, dentistry seems to be looking to broaden its academic worth by tying itself to other medically related schools or colleges. This creates what are now called “beneficial synergies.” [Read *ProsStars Newsletter*, Vol. 11, No. 3, July 2005]

The words “integration” and “synergies” are beginning to pop up all too frequently in our “change engine vocabularies.” Even the Executive Director of the American Dental Association, Dr. James Branson, spoke of “links which could fundamentally alter the integration of medicine and dentistry” when he addressed the Fall 2004 meeting of the American College of Dentists. He doesn't mean using our many trainings cooperatively to treat a patient in the best possible way. He means “integration” with medicine in research, training and practice facilities—with medicine in the driver's seat, of course. We know medicine is not dentistry and dentistry is not medicine. They are two separate professions—two professions separate by evolution and practice, structured pragmatically. Let's hope that we are not talking the talk, soon to be walking the walk, becoming only a small part of organized medicine.

2. A second caution in our look to the future might see our specialty changing. If it changes so that we all become only implantologists and cosmetologists of the teeth, we will be tossing away the great body of scientific knowledge and skills developed in the training that we all have acquired in our advanced prosthodontic education programs. We as prosthodontists are more trained and attuned to the many subdivisions of dentistry than any other specialty in dentistry. This is our forté, and we should not sidetrack the long road to being the “complete prosthodontist” for the sake of a making a quick dollar in a couple of the fads of the day.

Pessimisms in the sea of optimism? Let's hope not! But let's just say a warning shot has been fired across the bow!

## **Finally—The entire spectrum: Prosthodontics, Past, Present and Future**

In retrospect, there are few who would want to exchange places with the “greats” of the past. The battles they fought in order to create and elevate a learned dental specialty were necessary and they are our history, but it is not necessary for us to relive those battles of the early and middle decades of the past century in order to be proud of our status today. Let's just remember our prosthodontic forbearers plowed some tough ground in laying out our future and it has become the present we are enjoying.

Now as we arrive in this century, leaving those formative years behind us, Winston Churchill said it well when he spoke in the United States at the beginning of World War II—“we didn’t come this far because we were made of sugar candy.” Prosthodontists are the best of the health care team and we are eternally grateful for the pioneers in prosthodontics that made us what we are. We are not made of sugar candy but, most assuredly, we are highly trained specialists in every sense of the word!

Our good status today and our optimism cannot help but spill over into the future. Prosthodontics will continue to be rewarding. It will be challenging. We can be certain that we will be extremely fulfilled in our chosen profession and in our chosen specialty. We are, indeed, among the most fortunate few!

No, rewording that—our patients are indeed among the most fortunate few! Thank God for our many talents—and the way we use them.

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Web Site Administrator’s Note:

This issue of the *ProsStars Newsletter* was posted on the Web site just 45 days prior to the passing of my father. It gives me great pleasure to know that my father was able to contribute to his life’s passion right up until the end. In reading and editing these issues of the newsletter, I can hear the little pearls of wisdom he so often used during my upbringing and on into my adult years. While I am not a prosthodontist, or even a dentist, I am a scientist and a writer and I do appreciate the messages that my father was so passionate about communicating.

Thank you, Dad. Thanks for everything. May the GOOD LORD bless you and keep you for all eternity!