

The U in University



When we think of "Dental Education in the 21st Century", we mostly relate it to simulation technology and how it has replaced the traditional bench and manikin labs from the "old days". We talk about Erbium: YAG laser and its techno cousins that propel modern dentistry to higher planes, albeit making

enormous demands on our CE timetables. But how many of us consider the effects of dental schools being closed down around the world, or differing policies between dental universities and faculties on what qualifies as accredited programmes? What about the escalating costs required to upkeep the quality of a sound dental education? Yes, the solutions to many of these issues may appear the prerogative of the lawmakers and academia world, yet the underlying concerns certainly has a profound impact on the profession as a whole.

John Stamm, Professor and Dean, School of Dentistry, University of North Carolina, wrote in *"Dental Education in the 21st Century: Which Perspective, Which Mission, Which Future?"* (inside on page 36):

"...the future of a healthy and vibrant dental profession, in Asia as anywhere else, is linked to dental education and dental research occupying a legitimate and secure place in the modern research university."

Indeed, the futures of the profession and dental education are inextricably entwined such that if either is being marginalised, its repercussions will be felt by the other. After all, it was only under the auspices of a university-based education did dentistry come to be accepted as a profession.

In defining what is considered a profession, Edwin M. Speed, an American dental academic, once wrote that

"In addition to need, a profession must necessarily perform a service that is out of the ordinary, and the individual performing the service must have experienced training that is out of the ordinary." In a broad sense, the 'training' element, which in today's terms represents the university-based education, must not and never be seen as separate from the profession. Neither should the profession naively consider the university a distant memory that has no bearing on its own future.

If science and technology is said to play a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment of dental education, then surely the graduating professionals define it. The direct relationship between the profession and the university cannot be more clearly illustrated than by the returning graduates, who after honing their clinical skills in the "real world", offer to share their expertise as part-time lecturers. These homecoming dentists complete the circle of learning so badly needed to ensure that new cohorts of dentists are not trained in isolation from what is happening outside the classroom – which is essentially what a professional education is about.

The same way it took SARS to jolt the medical world out of its complacency, perhaps the closing down of dental faculties should send a strong signal to the dental community not to take the current high standards of dental education and research for granted. So the next time you read about a dental school closing down in India or Canada, remember that what you used to consider a little newsbite may be eating away at the very foundation of your profession.

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