"...176,634 professionally active dentists, including 162,180 in private practice"

A bird's eye view of dentistry in the U.S.

Dentistry in the United States has evolved in major ways in recent decades. This evolution was spurred in part by advances in oral care procedures and materials, and in part by the changing needs of the American people.

The U.S. Administration on Aging reported in 2006 that one in every eight Americans qualified as an 'older adult,' a figure that will rise dramatically as the 'baby boom' generation of those born after World War II enters retirement. The population of Americans older than 65 years is expected to double to about 71 million by 2030, and one in five U.S. residents will be 65 years or older by 2050. Many more of these Americans are keeping their teeth for a lifetime, thanks to advances in dental care and an increased emphasis on prevention. This means that, for present and future generations, dental care is a lifelong need.

Serving this changing population, the American Dental Association (ADA) reported in 2005, were 176,634 professionally active dentists, including 162,180 dentists in private practice. General dentists in the U.S. see an average of about 75 patients each week, while specialists average a little more than 100 weekly patient visits. Overall, about two thirds of U.S. dentists are sole proprietors. The average American dentist is a white male born in 1954, who received his dental degree in 1983. But that white-male demographic is changing gradually as increasing numbers of women and minorities are welcomed into the profession. In 2005-2006, more than 44% of the students enrolled in the 57 U.S. dental schools were women, 22% were Asian, and about 6% each were African-American and Hispanic.

In U.S. dental schools, more than 12,000 applicants vie for almost 5,000 first-year student slots. In past decades, several dental schools closed their doors but more recently, closures have given way to a growth spurt as new schools open and more students are accepted. Two new dental schools are now on the drawing board and expected to open within the next two years – all in anticipation of a large number of active U.S. dentists retiring within the next decade.

Improving access to care for the less fortunate has been a priority for the ADA and American dentists for decades. Starting in 2003, the Association stepped up its push for improved access when, with the help of corporate partners, it introduced Give Kids A Smile (GKAS), an annual access to care event that has provided treatment for as many as one million needy children on one special day in February. And GKAS is about to expand into a broader, year-long access programme. The dental schools also are addressing this need. Some schools, for instance, are developing opportunities for students to provide basic services in community centres and other public venues under the supervision of a licensed dentist.

There also is a growing interest in the association between oral health and general health, particularly in how diseases of the oral cavity affect overall health. In general, it is recognised that more research is needed before we have definitive answers to the question on how such relationships will affect provision of oral health care.

Also in the United States, a move toward evidence-based dental (EBD) practice is gaining ground. The ADA and other groups are working hard to inform practising dentists of this EBD approach.

Earlier this year, *The Journal of the American Dental Association (JADA)*, polled a random sample of readers, from which some selected findings were:

- Articles about the relationship between dentistry and medicine and about restorative care were highly valued, even outranking articles on cosmetic/aesthetic dental care and office technology
- A relatively new *JADA* feature called Master Clinician, in which dentists recognised for their clinical skills demonstrate how they would handle a difficult or unusual case, was high on the list of preferred content
- Asked whether certain topics should receive more or less attention, advancements in clinical care and dentistry and medicine received the highest rankings for more
- Also high on their list of preferences were dental product reviews and abstracts of articles from other journals
- Younger dentists were more likely than older dentists to favour articles on cosmetic/aesthetic dentistry, evidence-based dentistry and practice management.

As noted above, dentistry in America is evolving and improving with each passing year. No doubt, such is the case in Britain as well. With different health delivery systems and educational models, yet with excellent oral healthcare outcomes, let's learn from each other and flock together to create an even better future for our patients.

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We are delighted to publish this Editorial from Michael as part of an ongoing co-operation between the BDJ and JADA. This issue of the BDJ will feature on the BDJ's stand at the ADA's Convention in San Francisco later this month and the BDJ Editor-in-Chief has written an 'exchange' Editorial for JADA to appear in the October issue.