

Pediatric dentistry: amazing progress and promising future*

It's hard to believe that more than 40 years have passed since I began studying pediatric dentistry as an intern at the Eastman Dental Dispensary in Rochester. Forty years ago, children's dentistry was a fledgling specialty, and juvenile caries was as widespread a childhood disease as chicken pox, measles, or mumps.

What progress we have made! Today, more than a third of all teenagers raised with fluoridated water are totally caries free. Today, we have pit and fissure sealants that can diminish the rate of caries even further.

We've learned a great deal about the importance of nutrition as a basic element in health care — how eating the right foods can improve the teeth and bones in the oral cavity, and how to help our patients avoid problems with occlusion and TMJ disorders. Our understanding of why various foods contribute to dental caries also has grown more sophisticated. Moreover, advances in orthodontics and bonding have helped countless youngsters improve their health and physical appearance.

Dentistry's contributions have been just as valuable to babies and young children — whether the subject is nursing bottle mouth or cleft palate closure. Children with physical and mental handicaps are receiving greater attention, with more programs designed to increase their access to care. And our growing sophistication in behavioral research is helping dentistry alleviate young patients' fears and anxieties.

In the years ahead, we will be able to serve our patients even better. Imagine the ramifications of an anti-cavity vaccine, of plaque-dissolving agents and of time-release fluoride devices.

It's wonderful for me to look back 40 years and see how far pediatric dentistry has come since those early days. But it's just as thrilling to look forward, to see the amazing possibilities ahead of us, in this specialty that has moved forward so quickly.

There are still challenges we must address; however, we cannot afford to be complacent. Our access-to-care programs need to reach every unserved child in the country. And, as much as we emphasize the importance of prevention, many children still need to improve their oral hygiene. Moreover, the threats of smokeless tobacco and juvenile periodontitis to health are still unresolved; also, we must take greater responsibility in helping to manage the escalating child abuse problem.

I am optimistic about the future of pediatric dentistry. I have watched this specialty grow throughout my career. And, I have observed that while pediatric dentistry may well have grown up, it, like the patients we serve, will never grow old. Pediatric dentistry is always fresh, always new, always full of vigor and life. Each generation of young patients gives our specialty a burst of energy and innovation.

Who could be a better inspiration to us? For the sake of all our children, we will bring the art and science of pediatric dentistry to an unparalleled level of excellence.

Abraham Kobren

* ADA President Abraham Kobren is guest editorial writer for this issue. He addressed Academy members at the Annual Session in Colorado Springs at the Sunday luncheon, May 25.