

We are growing younger, too!

We often hear the prediction that by the year 2050, one in five of us will be 65 or older. Currently people 65 and older make up approximately 12% of the population.

But we are growing younger, too! The number of children younger than five soared almost 9% in the first half of the 1980s. We are now in the baby boom era. All those kids born between the time the Allies landed in Normandy and the Beatles landed at JFK now have children of their own. Also, the number of couples becoming parents for the first time is rising sharply. In addition, many couples who delayed in starting a family now are having their first child. Those who did not defer having children are having their first child right on schedule. Thus, we are observing the highest rate of first-time parents since just after World War II. The patter of little feet is beginning to sound more like the roar of a thundering herd. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the preschool population is now at its highest peak since 1968, with 17.8 million tots in this country. A few years ago schools across the nation were closing because of declining enrollment. Now the schools are being forced to reverse that trend and even build new schools to accommodate the influx of young children.

This increased population of young children is important to people who sell things for babies. First-time parents are big spenders with the attitude that "nothing is too good for our baby." This trend in the increasing number of children will be and is translating to an expanding demand for pediatric dental care. The present trend, supported by our Academy, toward the promotion infant dental care will challenge our specialty to expand dental health care services.

There is another emerging factor that will place greater responsibility on the pediatric dentist. Today in dental school clinics, where students receive their clinical experience, many more children are observed to be free of dental decay and require only preventive procedures and routine maintenance care. This change that has come about because of our profession's successful preventive programs and procedures has had an impact on our clinical education programs in dental schools throughout the country. Recently it was reported that 70% of the dental schools are experiencing a shortage of child patients needing extensive restorative care, pulp therapy, and appliance therapy. Thirteen dental schools believe that the undergraduate education in pediatric dentistry will be compromised by a shortage of child patients requiring extensive care. In general, dental students today leave dental school with less experience in treating complicated dental disease in children than those who were graduated a decade or two ago.

Many pediatric dentistry faculty members recognize with concern that their students upon graduation may practice in an area of the country where there continues to be a large number of children who experience rampant caries and require extensive clinical dental procedures.

So, with the increasing child population and the reduced clinical experience in the undergraduate pediatric dentistry clinics, it is expected that we will see an increased demand for the services of pediatric dentists who have completed an advanced education program.

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