

Remember the Children

If you follow the news, you are aware of the problems encountered by under-represented and discriminated groups in our society. If you have the luxury of time to watch or listen to the daily fare of talk shows, you may be as amazed as I am about the variety of groups which claim to be under-represented. The human permutations created by our evolving society have spawned a seemingly endless number of groups who have come out, formed support networks, and mustered public awareness of their problems and needs.

The elderly are one of the most visible and publicized of the emerging interest groups in our society, if not solely because they are becoming "us" at an ever-increasing pace, then because they can generate awareness because they have incomes, hold office, and vote. My purpose in this editorial isn't to discuss the elderly, however, but another discriminated group in our society. Like the elderly, they are growing in number daily. They are over-represented among the poor and minority populations. They suffer discrimination in housing and education and are experiencing a worsening access to health care. Many suffer and die daily at the hands of those in control. They have no vote, no income, and their rights under the law are less than those of the majority.

They are our children.

Many children in this country are losing in their pursuit of happiness and it's not due to anything they have or haven't done. Ironically, children in other cultures without our country's resources are faring better. The main difference appears to be the value placed on children by those societies. In many cultures, children are the greatest resource. It is fair to ask whether we as a nation share a similar value as

we once did, or whether we are becoming antichild. Few people would openly admit to this label and consider it preposterous to think of our society as such, but indications of a changing view of children are all around us.

Some facts are both convincing and disheartening. The United States ranks seventeenth in infant mortality (Japan ranks first). The number of children in poverty increases each year. Federal funding for maternal and child health issues has taken a dive and more and more dollars are being devoted to AIDS and the elderly. Child abuse is increasing and the increase can't be shrugged off as just the result of better reporting. More and more children are being cut off from access to health care due to lessening resources for public-supported care. Unfortunately, these are not new or rare revelations — I find them in the newspaper almost daily.

More subtle indicators of our society's changing view of children are found in failed school levies, adult-only communities, lack of a national child care policy, environmental abuse, and the national budget deficit. Any minority person will tell you that discrimination needn't be overt or intended. An attitude of ignorance or neglect can express itself as discrimination.

If the suffering of children were not enough, we must consider the long-range effects on our society. Henry Cisneros, former mayor of San Antonio, warns of an impending division of our society created by two growing populations. We may find ourselves in a new civil war, he warns, with an aged white population of haves pitted against a youthful minority population of have-nots.

Dentistry hasn't escaped the confrontation of young and old. Dr. Jimmy R. Pinkham at the University of Iowa, in a letter to the editor in the April 1990 *Journal of Dental Research*, warns us not to ignore the children as we hurry to address the looming burden

of the expanding elderly population. Antifluoridationists are *de facto* antichild. At the program of the College of Diplomates in Boston during our annual session, this issue came up again and again.

Despite appearances to the contrary, not all of our legislators are blind to the worsening status of children. Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey, among others, has made education of children a priority for national survival. His scenario for the future pits the United States against the emerging Asian countries in the quest for world prominence. Crucial to that competition is our ability to educate our young as well as those nations do.

The dental profession has a strong tradition of championing the child. We can be proud of our achievements in fluoridation, dental health programs, and care of special children over the last 50 years. Is our resolve to eradicate dental disease in children waning? A number of dental schools have downgraded pediatric dentistry from departmental status. The most esteemed dental epidemiologists would lead us to believe that dental caries is no longer a problem of children, but of the elderly. A body of dental literature has predicted the relegation of pediatric dentistry to recall and prophylaxis.

Our Academy has deemed child advocacy a priority and will devote its resources and people-power to making the lives of children better. We have already thrown our support behind a host of "extraoral issues" including recognition and management of child abuse and neglect, Medicaid reform, improvement of the status of mothers and infants,

immunization and infant nutrition, to mention just a few.

We are pediatric dentists and our world revolves around the child. Our professional involvement may not be enough. Do we advocate for the child outside the office? Many of us are involved in school boards, community-based activities like scouting, and other organizations which will, in the long haul, benefit the generation to come. Those of us in organized dentistry need to keep our colleagues aware of the continuing needs of children and reinforce the place of children in our profession's priorities. As citizens, we need to remind our legislators that our children are our future.

I tend to think long-term. I recycle, don't use paper towels at home, and put my money in savings. I vote for school levies and environmental issues. I will also encourage my kids to learn a foreign language... just in case. I just hope they won't have to be fluent!

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