

They are us

Andy Griffith's character in the comedy movie classic, *No Time For Sergeants*, Will Stockdale, is a hillbilly airman who learns about life in uniform through adventures which his foibles and down-home honesty convert to an understanding of life. One lesson comes by way of advice from a fellow airman who has learned that an attractive woman in a captain's uniform is, in the eyes of the Air Force, no different from a man in the same attire. It takes Will a while to put aside his instincts and biases, but he finally grasps the concept that an officer is an officer.

The growing body of literature on the attitudes, work habits, and desires of women in dentistry tends to emphasize the differences of this group from the mainstream of dentistry rather than the similarities. The very separation of gender, in itself, creates a dichotomous orientation that implies that the goals and aspirations of women (or for that matter, any other group) are tangential or peripheral to those of the majority.

The deeper message in the literature on women in dentistry is there for those who look beyond the statistical comparisons and can separate the inherent value of their message from the "us versus them" aspects created by the literary vehicle. Who doesn't want higher salaries and a safer workplace? Who would question the desire to have the opportunity to achieve on a fair and level playing field and to practice anywhere in the country? Who wouldn't appreciate workplace policies that allow professionals to have it all?

Environmental safety heads a list of items of importance to women in advanced training in the study by Barr et al., in this issue. The overkill of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration shouldn't prevent us from focusing on the inherent good of an environmental safety benchmark for dentistry and its potential for a common good to the profession. The Supreme Court, a most conservative group, in its decision in *Automobile Workers vs. Johnson Controls*, recognized that what was good for pregnant women was good for everyone in the workplace and decided for an environment that was safe for all workers, including those who were pregnant. That makes sense to me.

Two issues all dentists can identify with are practice management and licensure. The study of pediatric dentists conducted by the academy and published, in part, in this issue, supports a similar finding by Barr et al. that women pediatric dentists want and need more practice management education. This plea should sound familiar to our still-male-dominated leadership who've heard this from our still-male-dominated membership for years.

The mobility of married professionals makes licensure an important issue, as well. Many women pediatric dentists are married to physicians or other professionals who can move to better jobs easily. Our ludicrous dental licensure laws still prevent easy movement from state to state. If we aging male pediatric dentists think that's *their* problem, consider who that young pediatric dentist will be who's interested in buying your practice 10 years from now. It is in everyone's interest — practitioners and patients alike — to work actively to break down licensure barriers. As a board-certified pediatric dental educator with two regional boards under his belt and carrying around licensure in three states as "insurance," this is my problem!

The "they are us" philosophy emphasizes the likeness between people rather than their differences. The political correctness of this approach may be criticized, since it's desirable to celebrate diversity these days, but it seems that in history, working together for the common good has been more efficient, more humane, and more successful than trying to co-exist in a crucible of self-interest, reluctantly accepting a group's upward movement or having it forced upon you. We need only to look at eastern Europe to see how well factions work together without a common bond! Clearly, a first step is for both sides of an issue to recognize the benefit of the other's point of view for their own condition.

Another striking aspect of the literature is the vitality of the issues raised. Increased income, dependent care, equality in the workplace, and environmental safety are not token points, but the fiber of our lives which touches the values we hold important. Recognition of this is a second step, and maybe the most important for the survival of an organization,

society, nation, or business because it speaks to the intensity of the commitment on both sides of the issue.

What should emerge from the growing literature on women in dentistry is that what's good for the goose is good for the gander, to use a fit metaphor. Women dentists are young dentists, are old dentists, are the future, and *our* future as pediatric dentists. We

would be serving ourselves well to listen closely to their message. By doing so, we will serve each other well in our specialty.

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