

The Angle Orthodontist

*A magazine established by the co-workers
of Edward H. Angle, in his memory. . . .*



Editors

HAROLD J. NOYES

ANNA HOPKINS ANGLE
ROBERT H. W. STRANG

WENDELL L. WYLIE
GEORGE C. CHUCK

FREDERICK B. NOYES
ALLAN G. BRODIE

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MARGARET BLACK

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Business Manager

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Over the Horizon in Dentistry

THESE ARE days when the peoples of nations are looking with inquisitive speculation at the future. Never before has this inquiry been as broad or penetrated as deeply through masses of persons with common interests. Literacy, education, means of communication, and the impact of global war may be certain of the most obvious reasons for this concern and a proportional relationship surely exists between the degree to which these factors have affected the lives of men and women and their desire to control what lies ahead.

One is not surprised that the American Indian with limited knowledge of the world and its peoples and intimate knowledge of his environment and tradition chose an action program which meant practical extinction and at the same time the loss of philosophical and cultural contributions to the peoples responsible for his obliteration. Nor is one astonished, when considering the intellectual background of the social groups that invaded America, that this loss was considered of small consequence. There were, to be sure, occasional and rare prophets on both sides who looked to the horizon and heard their voices drowned in the cries of "visionaries, radicals, traitors."

The practitioners of medicine and dentistry are looking ahead, looking with more than inquisitive speculation, some with apprehension and alarm,

others with a hysteria which approaches panic. Is it not surprising that these professions so proud of their evolution from empiricism and symptomatic treatment to rational therapy based upon a knowledge of the cause and course of the diseases they treat, an understanding of the foods and medicines they use and the physiologic response essential in cure or repair, are so reluctant to apply the identical principles of scientific approach and analysis when confronted with the problem of the future? It is true that in a measure both professions have made some effort in this direction. They have created committees, commissions, and councils and have, through these agencies, employed specialists in the fields of political and social science. Yet when the reports of these bodies or persons have been at variance with a treasured and traditional concept they have been ignored and discredited. New committees were formed, new and less "visionary," less "radical" advisors have been sought. The practice is reminiscent of the behavior of patients who, upon receiving advice contrary to their lay opinion, continue to search for a practitioner who will tell them what they wish to be told.

It is no secret that the dentists of the United States are fearful of two things: that the private practice of dentistry is threatened and that income of dentists may be reduced. If either or both are correct, it is a matter of real concern to that segment of our national population who are dentists. If true and the alternative methods of dental practice are less effective and fail to provide for development and progress in the treatment and repair of oral disease, it is of real concern to all persons who do or may expect to benefit by these services.

Let us examine the first of these fears. Is the private practice of dentistry threatened? The practice of dentistry as an individual service essentially in the office of the practitioner developed because it was effective, and there were sufficient numbers of persons who could and would pay for services rendered in this manner to encourage other persons to become dentists. Two significant observations should be made at this point. First, there is no scientific evidence that this is the only effective method of rendering dental service and, second, there is no shred of scientific evidence that on the whole the part of our population who can afford and have preferred this method of service will not continue to do so. Moreover there is no evidence that any governmental agency or proposed legislation has threatened this method of practice. The impact upon private practice is essentially through income variations as the public is affected by fluctuating economic cycles and as well by the consistent social trend toward reducing high and increasing low incomes. Neither of these factors will be influenced one iota by the attitude or action of dentists singly or as a group.

With respect to the second fear, will the incomes of dentists be lowered? The answer to this question is dependent upon many aspects of the former and upon definition of income. In the light of both long and short term influences there seems to be little reason to doubt that more money will be spent for dental services in the future than in the past. In other words the over all income to dentistry will increase. What this will mean to individual dentists will depend upon the number who share this income, the attendant costs of rendering the service, and the number of persons served. From an immediate point of view there is no reason to expect that either through legislation or economic conditions will the number of persons who can afford

and have become accustomed to receiving private dental service decrease any more rapidly than the number of dentists who have, through training and inclination, chosen to render the service in private practice. From a long range viewpoint it would seem likely that there will continue to be a considerable number of persons who will prefer individual attention in the private dental office and also, there will be an increasing number of persons who will, through necessity or preference, receive these services in a manner where reduction in overhead or the contribution from tax-collected funds will reduce the unit costs. As the persons in the latter group have either had no service whatever or have been seen by the dentists with the lowest incomes, except that small number who have been charity patients in which case they represent deduction from income, it seems inevitable that the incomes of the dentists who serve this group will be increased.

In view of these considerations it would seem no more than sensible for the Dental profession to cease their wailing and wringing of hands, turn off the fire alarm, and examine the fire. There is no question that people like private service when they can afford it. They ride in the pullman not the day coach, send their children to private schools and camps, sit on the main floor at the theatre not in the gallery. Yet the people who ride in the day coach reach the same destination, the children in public schools get a good education, the people in the gallery see the same play. They do these things the way they do because they either do not have the money to do otherwise or they wish to keep it. This is all common "horse sense" and what we choose to call a democratic way of life.

When we blow the smoke away our problem is clear. We have to offer the American public one or a combination of methods of supplying the dental service we, for fifty years, have been telling them they need. We must be certain that it is good service but not necessarily done up in ribbons and tissue paper with one assistant, one x-ray, one laboratory, and two dental units to the dentist. We must be certain the remuneration of the dentist will permit him the education, study, and incentive that is essential to a high level of service and we must be certain that the services he delivers justify the remuneration. This means experimental research in ways of rendering dental services, methods, techniques, equipment, education. It means the abandonment of critical attitudes of the manner in which the public wishes to pay for this service, privately, prepayment, postpayment, insurance or taxes. Is it the teachers' business to tell the public how it will pay for its education? Yet it is the teachers' business to see that what the public buys is education.

The same may be said for dentistry. If we put into this problem the same resource, energy, and earnest intellectual effort that dentistry has received since the days of Hayden and Harris, the first thing we know we will be gliding into the next hundred years looking for new problems.

H. J. N.