

Editorial Department

The Dental Laboratory

The problem of the commercial dental laboratory is just now attracting a great deal of attention from the dental profession. Like many things in professional affairs, the development of the last half century has been so rapid that new and unforeseen conditions have arisen. Half a century ago practically all dentists did their own laboratory work, although many of them trained boys or young men to do part of it such as the vulcanizing and polishing of vulcanite dentures. Then the busier and more prosperous engaged a laboratory assistant or technician; occasionally a group of men secured the services of a specially skillful individual to do the laboratory work for the group. This was more often the case where porcelain work was being done, including the making of porcelain dentures or "continuous gum work."

With the rapid improvement in technical methods and the development of new methods, especially in casting and the use of new materials, it has become impossible for any one man to be highly skillful in all lines of technical dentistry. Consequently a commercial laboratory secures the services of one man highly skilled in casting, another in the use of porcelain, and so on. The growth of the commercial dental laboratory, therefore, has been a necessary sequence of the development of restorative methods and is essentially a perfectly normal and proper part of the organization of dental service.

In a great majority of cases the commercial laboratory has been properly used by the dental profession. The commercial laboratory operates under the order and direction of dentists. The dentist is professionally responsible for the usefulness and value to the patient of the appliance or restoration made in the laboratory. The laboratory may give the dentist technical advice in determining materials to be used or method of construction but it assumes no responsibility for the value or usefulness of the appliance to the patient. It is, therefore, strictly a technical service to the professional man and the professional responsibility remains entirely with the dentist.

With the growing demand for orthodontic service, the commercial dental laboratory has reached out into a new field, that of making orthodontic appliances for the general practitioner of dentistry. This development has been greatly augmented by the economic conditions which have led all men to look around for new sources of income. In the field of orthodontia, the functions of the commercial dental laboratory are entirely different and the relation of the laboratory to the dentist has been changed and almost reversed. Com-

mercial dental laboratories have been advertising their ability not only to make appliances for the dentist but to tell him what appliances should be used, to furnish the direction for their application and operation, and to guarantee successful results. In the writer's opinion, this is a violation, both of the legal and the ethical codes. The laboratory is the servant of the doctor, not his professional advisor. If the general practitioner wishes professional consultation and advice, he should receive this from one trained in practice and not from commercial organizations.

Although a commercial laboratory may employ a man with a dental degree who is legally licensed to practice his profession, as a member of the personnel of a commercial laboratory and in its name he has no right, either legal or ethical, to give professional advice. Advising what appliances should be used, giving directions for their application and use, for the correction of human deformity constitutes the practice of orthodontia; this the commercial dental laboratory has no legal right to undertake. Orthodontic service conducted on this basis, can seldom be of benefit to anybody but the operator and it must inevitably react against him. There have been many articles appearing, especially in the trade journals, advising the general practitioner to embark on this dangerous sea. The extent to which this has been done is probably much greater than the sober-minded members of the dental profession realize. At a meeting of the New York Society of Orthodontists in December the statement was made on the floor that the speaker had been told quite lately by the manager of one of the largest commercial dental laboratories in the country, that in a recent month their volume of business in constructing orthodontic appliances on plaster casts sent in by general practitioners exceeded the total of crown and bridge and denture work combined.

The writer is convinced that the majority of the dental profession realize that the above program can bring only discredit upon both dentistry and orthodontia. It is vitally important, however, for all who are sincerely interested in the well-being of the public to study what can be done to correct this unfortunate condition.

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