

## **The secret is out**

**Steven J. Lindauer**

I decided that I wanted to be an orthodontist when I was 12 years old. Every month, my parents would take me on the half hour drive to the only orthodontist in our area that would see patients on weekends. This was so I wouldn't have to miss school to attend my appointments. I wore a removable appliance (faithfully, I might add) and the orthodontist would tighten it up, occasionally grind on it, and send me back out to the waiting room. It would take only a few minutes and I would be back in the car on my way back home. Everyone at the office was friendly and talked to me like I was an adult. The orthodontist always appeared to be very happy and calm and, honestly, his job seemed to have some challenge to it but also looked pretty simple overall. I thought this might be a good career for me. It felt like "orthodontist" would be a respectable answer to that goading question that adults ask 12 year olds persistently: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Back in 1973, of course, there were no computers and no internet. I had no idea, really, of what I would need to do to become an orthodontist. I got the address for the American Association of Orthodontists and I wrote them a letter (phoning long-distance would be too expensive) asking them for information. And they wrote back. I got a listing of orthodontic programs and I learned that I would first have to finish college and then go through dental school before I could even apply. There were 2 year programs and 3 year programs (and even an 18 month program I think) and, I thought, I should attend a 3 year program so I could take my time and do it right.

Now, the secret is out. We all knew that it was true and we didn't really need to have it pointed out to us. Even so, there is some satisfaction that comes from knowing that we were right. And then, maybe it really was better to keep it to ourselves as a special secret. Now, everyone will know: "Orthodontist" was ranked as the #1 best job on US News & World Report's (US News) list of the 100 best jobs for 2016 (<http://money.usnews.com/careers/best-jobs/rankings>; accessed February 15, 2016). It came as a surprise to me, not because I didn't think it was true but because I didn't really think anyone would notice. It seems like we have been flying under the radar for such a long time.

The US News rankings are based largely on data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). US News devised a formula which gives points to each job based on (in order of priority): salary, employment rate, expected growth over 10 years, job prospects for the future, stress level (low stress is obviously better), and work-life balance. Orthodontists did NOT rank #1 in salary so it was the other factors that put us over the top. It was encouraging to see that the BLS predicts that the demand for orthodontic care will increase by 18% over ten years. This equates to 1500 new jobs (does that seem like a lot?). The rating also takes into account how many people will actually be seeking to fill these jobs compared to the number of openings. To me, it feels like we are graduating more orthodontists each year than the year before but the BLS doesn't predict a glut of orthodontists in the future. Not accounted for in the rankings was the cost of education and mounting student debt levels; perhaps this should be an aspect to consider too.

Job stress levels and work-life balance figured into the formula for the rankings at only 5% each and these are also difficult factors to quantify. The values used were based on selective interviews but it is quite clear that orthodontists generally experience less stress and better overall balance than other healthcare providers. As explained within the description given, Orthodontists "provide meaningful healthcare without feeling the pressure of the life-and-death scenarios that might crop up in other medical specialties." Personally, I think we should be given extra credit points for our circumstance that is unique among all healthcare providers: our patients are actually healthy and we are given the opportunity to build positive, long-term relationships by seeing them regularly over an extended period of time.

What would you say to a 12 year old boy or girl who thinks becoming an orthodontist might be a good career choice for them? They might stubbornly hold on to their dream through high school and college. By the time I was 13, my treatment was completed and I was wearing retainers. Thereafter, "I am going to be an orthodontist" became my answer to the pervasive question of what I was going to be when I grew up. Most adults seemed to approve of my answer. They must have known the secret too.