

Looking for the Future

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A few months ago, I received a phone call asking me if I would consider speaking at “OrthoVoice 2016” as “The Voice of Excellence”. Honestly, I had no idea what I was getting myself into but I continued listening. It turns out that OrthoVoice is promoted as a free-spirited, practice-enhancing experience, that you might otherwise consider to be a practice management-focused summit for orthodontists and their staff. Considering that I have spent my entire career-life teaching in an academic setting, I wondered what I could possibly offer to practitioners looking to market their practice and streamline for efficiency. I’ve lectured all over the world but always about academic and scientific topics. Usually, the group that invites me wants me to talk about treatment mechanics and techniques, new findings in a particular field of our specialty, or something related to publishing in *The Angle Orthodontist*. This was something new and different, a challenge, and so I said “Yes, I will do it!”

I put OrthoVoice in the back of my mind and went back to my usual routine. I am not really a procrastinator, but my job as Department Chair, teacher, and research mentor for my residents, along with the steady stream of new manuscripts coming into the journal (2 to 3 per day!), keep me pretty busy. In addition, at that time, the AAO annual session was coming up and I was the Doctors’ Program co-Chair so there were a lot of details to attend to. As I was reminded recently, however, “the work begins once the seed is planted.” Throughout these past months, despite working on many different fronts, my mind kept churning to find something that the “Voice of Excellence” could say that would set the tone for a meeting I had never attended.

Our annual alumni meeting was held at the end of February and it was focused on aligner therapy this year. The younger graduates were taking it all in stride and picking up pearls but some of the more mature orthodontists were skeptical, bewildered, and then maybe even a little scared. A couple of them told me afterward that they had a lot of catching up to do and needed to change their way of thinking. My mind registered that it can be hard to keep up with all the

new developments our specialty has experienced recently. They come on faster and faster with each passing year.

Before I knew it, the AAO meeting was just around the corner. I thought back to the first formal meeting of our planning committee, three years before. What an awesome experience the whole process had been, working with a wonderful and very caring group of people for a common cause, and it would all culminate soon. Three years ago, we sat in a room and brainstormed to come up with the unifying theme: “Bringing us Together” as an invitation to come and share the AAO experience with different people who have something in common: our specialty.

If you give it some thought, there really are a lot of different people participating in the AAO annual session, all with different interests, and all of whom are involved in orthodontics. There are the orthodontists themselves, their families, the staff members, and the manufacturers. Unlike 30 years ago, when I entered the specialty, “orthodontist” doesn’t necessarily mean a solo or partner practitioner running their own office. More and more new graduates are electing to work in a corporate environment as an employee of a larger practice instead. Then, there are generational differences, with young recent graduates, established doctors, more mature practitioners, and those looking at retirement. Each one of these orthodontic players, “interested parties” if you will, is looking to get something different out of their investment. How is it possible to keep all of these people together? A question and challenge, most definitely, that has kept AAO administrators and its leadership earnestly engaged.

As I walked (and sometimes ran) from room to room at the AAO annual session, monitoring attendance and crowd flow to make sure everything was running smoothly, I caught short snippets from many of the Doctors’ lectures. Maybe it was me, but what I heard as an underlying message running through many of these talks, was that we are worried about the future and the changes it could bring. The trend these speakers saw was that, as a specialty, we are looking to do everything faster, cheaper, with less effort, and maybe even without considering (or caring?) what the outcome would be. They were telling us to slow down, not

to cut corners or skip steps, to be comprehensive in our thought process and planning, and to strive for excellence. And again, maybe it was me, but the audience seemed to be receptive to this message. The attendees really appeared to appreciate having someone tell them to put quality first.

So, I've decided that I want to explore these concepts of the future at OrthoVoice. What will I say about the future? I'm really not sure yet. It's coming up at the end of this month but I needed to write this piece

three months ago to meet the publication deadline. If you look back at the orthodontic literature over the past 50+ years, there are plenty of prognostications regarding the direction that our specialty is headed, both positive and negative. Periods of rapid change: technological, philosophical, and financial cause imbalance, uncertainty, or even a sense of panic. I know that I am not good at predicting the future. But, I think we all need to be prepared to face the future, whatever it may bring.