

“Digital orthodontics” or just “orthodontics”?

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The speed at which technological evolution changes the routine of our lives is surprising! Simple gestures such as communication between people, or even seemingly more complicated ones, such as paying a bill or buying an airline ticket, have changed completely! Today, it sounds strange for anyone to say that they went to the bank or a tourist agency, doesn't it?! How about stopping by the video store to rent a VHS tape?

The changes brought by technology followed the same trend in our specialty. Everything is becoming “digital”! Interestingly, 20 years ago, we were transitioning from analog to digital photography. At that time, we were discussing the pros and cons of both options. We must recognize that new technology can generate concern, insecurity, and/or doubt. And that is precisely what happened during the transition to digital photography. This behavior is expected and understandable. After all, according to the popular saying: “if it ain't broke, don't fix it.” Do these thoughts apply to what we are experiencing today?

Currently, this is our scenario in orthodontics. There is a lot of debate about conventional orthodontics (analog, traditional or simply “orthodontics”) versus “digital orthodontics.” What are the pros and cons of each? Is it worth migrating? And, going further, would one be better?

It is important to remember the meaning of the word “better.” According to the dictionary, “the better one; that which is better.” Therefore, is digital orthodontics superior to the one being compared?

If you're still reading this editorial, maybe you're eager for a simple answer. Unfortunately, the simple answer does not exist because the discussion point is much broader. Better at what and for whom? For clinicians, patients, students, professors, employees, companies, etc.? And which aspect is better: technical, financial, human, or behavioral? The debate is rich and would certainly not fit into this editorial.

However, we can use two examples of common orthodontic situations: a scanning procedure and scheduling an appointment.

The first, the “digital” procedure, with the use of an intraoral scanner, has already proven to be superior for the patient in terms of comfort, and for the dental team in terms of procedure time. However, technically, we still need technological improvements to the equipment, which is certainly already being carried out by manufacturers as you read this text.

When it comes to digital appointments (computer and phone apps, websites, or call robots), technology has lost out to human-to-human interaction. And it's not just for older people as we initially believed. Talking to someone who can meet your demands has not yet been well replaced by digital resources.

What matters in this discussion? What is the most relevant aspect? Returning to the example of photography, currently, it is impossible to imagine a conversation about which camera we use for leisure, traveling, or work. Analog or digital? The issue is different: analog photography no longer really exists. Photography is simply photography.

Therefore, when the conversation is about “digital” in orthodontics, thinking will follow the same trend. Changes are inherent to life, and this applies to any segment. Change is a daily, inevitable, and constant need. In a few years, we will no longer use the term “digital workflow in orthodontics” or “digital workflow.” The pros and cons will not be discussed, because it will simply be “orthodontics.”

After this intriguing reflection, it is necessary to highlight a crucial and perhaps most important point: the quality of the services provided in orthodontics. To this end, being “digital” is not and will never be synonymous with quality, but rather, it is about the clinical and scientific training of clinicians. This aspect must always come before any technological knowledge! In other words, the transition to digital orthodontics is inevitable. However, for it to be carried out with quality, competent and dedicated professionals will always be essential.