

Gender Shift in Pediatric Dentistry

There are countries in which the majority of dentists are women. Not so in the United States where most dentists are male. However, as in other health professions, a gender shift is taking place and increasing numbers of women are becoming dentists. In the mid 1970's, only 1.5% of dentists were women, but by 1995, that number increased to 12%. The change was even more dramatic in pediatric dentistry. In 1991, 16% of Academy members were women. Five years later, there was a slight increase to 19% female, and by 1998, the percentage of women in the Academy had climbed to 28%. The change soon will accelerate markedly as our training programs begin to graduate many more women than men. In 1980, there were only 8% female students in American pediatric dentistry postdoctoral training programs. Ten years later, the number increased to 48% and by 1995, it had increased even further to 60% female students. Just as Pediatrics has done in medicine, Pediatric Dentistry has led the profession in a gender shift of its members. Since that change was not planned, it would be useful to consider its outcomes in regard to work related issues.

The American Dental Association surveyed dentists and found differences in the way males and females practiced. Almost twice as many males (62%) became owners of their own practices in comparison with females (35%) who often preferred association with group practices. When they are young, some women prefer not to have the responsibilities of practice ownership. They desire the freedom to work part-time or even to give up work while they raise a family. They also want to be able to move with their spouses if that need

develops. For older pediatric dentists having difficulty finding young graduates to whom they might sell their practices, this factor becomes an important economic issue. However, it is important to note that although young female dentists tend to work fewer hours per week treating patients (6 fewer hours than males), there is an adjustment that occurs and the difference becomes negligible for long time practitioners. As careers develop, productivity becomes similar for both groups.

Women are slowly attaining parity with men in the American workplace. Yet as women aspire for careers like their male counterparts, they often encounter difficulty in balancing careers with family responsibilities. It is a struggle for some women who sense the "passage of time on their biological clocks". While wanting to achieve professionally, they also seek the fulfillment of giving birth to and raising children. They work part-time treating patients, but they work full-time as homemakers raising families. For those practitioners, there are difficult choices and no simple solutions.

Pediatric Dentistry leads the specialties in providing career opportunities for women. What is now needed is understanding and action. Although we cannot walk in the footsteps of others, we can seek to understand the struggles of women who attempt to balance thriving careers with family obligations. We should continue to develop alternative pathways in our training programs and our professional practices. We should endeavor to increase the number of graduates from our training programs to meet short term needs. The gender shift is occurring. As a specialty, we must respond to the ramifications of that change.

