The outlook for dentistry in Australia: the past, the present and the future

Grant Townsend
Sch Dent, Univ Adelaide, Australia

There were only five dental schools in Australia until about 10 years ago but there are now 12 dental schools in the University sector offering courses not only in dentistry but also in oral health (e.g. therapy and hygiene). This rapid increase has occurred without any national planning or coordination. There has also been an erosion of the autonomy of dental schools that once existed as separate faculties. This has been associated with severe funding difficulties and a lack of effective advocacy within the university and with governments about the distinctive needs and concerns of dentistry.

Dentistry’s problems are a reflection of the issues facing all Australian universities, particularly the research intensive ones. The universities are generally keen for fees to be de-regulated but this could lead to $100,000 degrees that would raise issues of equity. The reforms that have occurred in the tertiary education sector in Australia have also led to corporate managerialism and a loss of academic collegiality.

It is likely that new graduates with large debts (faced with a competitive environment including therapists with expanded roles) will focus on those aspects of dentistry that provide the best remuneration. These include implants and milled crowns—procedures that require high levels of diagnostic and operative skill but for which evidence of long-term success is lacking. But these areas are only covered at a basic level in dental school. So there is a growing disconnect between the education of dental students and the type of practice they are likely to carry out on graduation. Furthermore, 85% of Australian dentists work in the private sector and many Australians cannot afford to pay for treatment, so a large proportion of the population is unable to access regular dental care.

National bodies such as the Dental Board of Australia (DBA) and the Australian Dental Council (ADC) have pivotal roles to play in ensuring the standard of dentistry is maintained and there is now a mandatory requirement for registered dental practitioners to participate in continuing professional development (CPD). But what will happen to the standard of dental education and research, and the standard of dental care of Australians, in the future?

There are many challenges ahead—for dental schools, universities and governments. Dental schools need to ensure that their graduates demonstrate high levels of professionalism with a strong social conscience. Graduates also need to continue to learn, be able to evaluate evidence, and be prepared for an era of personalised medicine. Schools must also ensure that academics are able to carry out meaningful research. Universities need to understand that they cannot run high quality dental schools without resourcing them adequately. Governments need to understand that the mouth is part of the body and that oral health is integral to general health. This should then be reflected in the way they fund dental education and dental services to ensure that all Australians have access to high quality dental care.

Grant Townsend is Professor of Dental Science, Leader of the Craniofacial Biology and Dental Education Group, and Director of Assessment in the School of Dentistry at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. He was Associate Dean (Academic) throughout the 1990s when a PBL-based dental curriculum was introduced at the Adelaide Dental School, and he is still heavily involved in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching in the School, including teaching head and neck anatomy, neuro-anatomy, human growth and development, and local anaesthesia.

Grant’s research interests include craniofacial biology, especially twin studies of the dento-facial region, and also dental education. He has published over 350 refereed papers and book chapters and has been invited to give lectures or act as an external examiner or consultant in many countries. He was awarded the Alan Docking Science Award in 2000 by the IADR (ANZ Division) for outstanding scientific achievement in the field of dental research and was made a Corresponding Member of the Finnish Dental Society in 2007 in recognition of outstanding contributions to dental research with Finnish collaborators. He has recently edited a special issue of the Australian Dental Journal with Professor Alan Brook, titled ‘The face, the future, and dental practice: how research in craniofacial biology will influence patient care’ and, with his colleagues in Adelaide and overseas, contributed several papers to the issue. He has also just published a book on his studies of twins that have spanned a period of over 30 years, titled ‘Twin studies: research in genes, teeth and faces’.