
FUTURE OF DENTISTRY

Today's Vision: Tomorrow's Reality

American Dental Association
Health Policy Resources Center



American Dental Association
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The Future of Dentistry report was developed by a large group of individuals, selected for participation because of their knowledge, expertise and commitment to the welfare of the dental profession and the public it serves. Throughout the preparation of this report, the creative effort was conducted with great independence. **The ideas expressed herein are not necessarily those of, nor endorsed by, the American Dental Association.**

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Message from the President of the American Dental Association

I have on occasion compared the dental profession to the great works of art, always emphasizing that it is a work in progress.

This document is a vital tool for dentistry as the profession grows and evolves in these beginning years of the 21st century. The information and recommendations in this report provide the tools we need to mold, paint and shape the strong future that all of us want for our profession and certainly for our patients.

As we take up this task, we should be mindful of the legacy developed by the actions of those who came before us. Our strong public image came not from outside forces but from dentists—all giving, sacrificing and working for the good of the public and the profession. I am convinced that the future will be determined in this same manner. Together, we can determine the wisest steps to take and then commit ourselves to the actions necessary to strengthen dental education, research, practice, access to care for the underserved, our role in governmental affairs, and other key aspects of this profession.

The future is in our hands ... and, with this document in our hands, we are ready to build that future!



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Foreword

Today's Vision: Tomorrow's Reality

Looking to the future and predicting what the oral health needs of our citizens will be, and how to address them, are formidable tasks. It is equally difficult to discern the problems that will confront our profession. The 2001 Future of Dentistry report attempts to create a vision of challenges that are likely to emerge in the coming years. The report is based upon reasonable evaluation and interpretation of current information and observable trends.

This project, while commissioned by the American Dental Association, is not a policy document of the organization. It has been designed to reach out to all parties interested in the betterment of health throughout the world and, more specifically, to those who are able to contribute to improving the delivery of dental care in order to achieve the optimal oral health of the public.

The many who contributed to this report—giving enormously of their time and expertise—hope that future generations will look back on it as a landmark document. It represents their commitment to excellence and an understanding that the profession and its partners must set aside parochial agendas to fulfill their social responsibility. The authors want the report to be read and believe firmly that all who do so will develop a better understanding of the issues facing the dental profession in its pursuit of excellence in serving the public.

The 2001 Future of Dentistry Report is intended to be a practical guide for the profession's next generation. It is meant to stimulate thoughts and actions that will move the dental profession forward into the new century. In order for it to have the lasting impact, the report must become a living document that can be amended and redesigned as circumstances evolve.

The report's central theme is one of global cooperation. The modern world is a much smaller place than our parents knew. Our children will live in an even smaller world. It is clear that in this complex and ever-changing world, isolation is not a viable option. This is a clarion call for dentistry's international community to come together in a coordinated effort to improve the world's oral health.

Plans for the future must take into account that advances in the diagnosis and treatment of oral disease are being made throughout the world. Sophisticated informational technology will be emerging to benefit both the public and dental professionals. Cooperative efforts will no longer require that individuals be in the same room. Instead, interaction can occur almost instantly among persons separated by continents.

However, science and technology cannot solve all problems. Political will, social responsibility and the willingness to set aside cultural differences are also necessary. The dental profession has a bright and exciting future that can be achieved only by a commitment to think creatively, eliminate barriers, and forge new alliances.

As a healing profession, we must have but one over-riding vision. All people, whatever their status, whatever their age, wherever they live, should have the right to good oral health. That is our call to action. That is our challenge. Let us rededicate ourselves to this vision and become faithful stewards of the commitment to make today's vision tomorrow's reality.



Leslie W. Seldin, D.D.S.
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Preface

Successful planning is never easy. It requires a clear-eyed assessment of the past, of what impeded progress at one point, what propelled it at another. It also requires an appreciation of an axiomatic truth: that tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.

With that in mind, the dental profession has begun the process of evaluation that, given the complexity of the world in the 21st century, will ensure the most desirable future for dentistry and the public it serves.

This difficult task of dentistry's preparation for the future is heightened by its own diversity—general dentists and specialists in and out of private practice, educators and researchers, members of the Federal Dental Services, and allied dental personnel. Beyond its own borders, the profession must respond to a range of outside influences, including government and commercial interests. Satisfaction of the oral health needs of the public becomes the ultimate goal of the process.

Professional organizations have a wider responsibility than just their own memberships. They also have a responsibility to a trusting public and must be in a position to meet any new developments with confidence. Looking to the future and predicting what will confront the dental profession are formidable tasks. Dentists, as scientists, cannot purport to have visionary capabilities or to be fortunetellers. Thus, the observations and predictions contained in this document are based on measurable trends that can be extended legitimately into the years ahead.

Clearly, much must be done to guarantee the most desirable future for the profession and the public. To achieve that goal, all issues that touch dentistry must be identified and addressed. Sensitive matters cannot be brushed aside or ignored. This report identifies all areas of concern. Its authors have been committed to the belief that the duty of the profession and its partners require them to put aside any personal agendas and to focus on the future, in seeking to fulfill their responsibility to protect the viability of a respected profession and effectively serve a deserving public.

The 1983 Future of Dentistry Report

In 1983, the American Dental Association published a report on the future of dentistry that explored the state of the profession at that time and offered predictions on the challenges dentistry would likely face in the years ahead. That first report also provided a number of broad recommendations and laid the groundwork for a strategic planning process that continues to this day.

As the future became the present, many of the forecasts contained in the 1983 document proved accurate; others did not. More important than the document itself was the profession-wide self-examination it kindled. The complex act of preparing the report forced the profession to explore its mission and structure and to address difficult issues and confront them with its best wisdom.

The 2001 Future of Dentistry Report

The ADA House of Delegates recognized the value of rekindling the process begun 15 years earlier when, in 1998, it approved the blueprint for development of a new Future of Dentistry report. The charge was essentially the same this time as last: Look unflinchingly into the future; recommend actions and activities that will help the profession meet its responsibilities in the years ahead.

A task force was assigned to prepare a plan. The 1999 House of Delegates approved the plan and commissioned preparation of a new Future of Dentistry report. The Board of Trustees of the ADA appointed an Oversight Committee with members representing all corners of the dental profession. This committee, responsible for the development, structure and content of the project was charged with presenting its final report to the 2001 ADA House of Delegates.

Assessing the sheer enormity of the project before it, the committee decided to separate the task into logical parts. Panels of nationally recognized experts were recruited to explore the issues and trends in six critical areas:

- ◆ Clinical Dental Practice and Management
- ◆ Financing of and Access to Dental Services

- ◆ Dental Licensure and Regulation of Dental Professionals
- ◆ Dental Education
- ◆ Dental and Craniofacial Research
- ◆ Global Oral Health

As a first step, each panel was asked to make an honest appraisal of the prevailing environment in its assigned area. Panelists were to pinpoint trends; to separate what is known from pure speculation; and to offer reasonable, logical predictions for the future, defined as the next 5 to 15 years, depending on the area of interest. Finally, each panel was to forge recommendations aimed at helping the profession meet future challenges.

The report was written by several authors and reflects the style of those authors. During the editing process, some standardization of format was developed, but no attempt was made to develop a uniform style.

To secure input from all of dentistry's disparate communities of interest, the Oversight Committee solicited written testimony from various groups and individuals. It also held a series of three public forums (October 2000, March 2001, June 2001) where communities of interest, dental organizations and ADA constituent dental societies could share their views on the project. Drafts of the report-in-progress were distributed prior to each conference.

This final report, almost two years in the making, is meant to serve the entire dental community and the public. Thus, the insights and recommendations are directed to assist any individual or organization which seeks to ensure and protect the oral health of the public.

Acknowledgements

The Future of Dentistry report was developed by a large group of individuals, selected for participation because of their knowledge, expertise and commitment to the welfare of the dental profession and the public it serves. Throughout the preparation of this report, the creative effort was conducted with great independence. This was the intention of the House of Delegates of the American Dental Association (ADA), which commissioned the study. The demand that the report be honest, objective and unresponsive to external pressures was scrupulously observed.

This project could not have succeeded without the selfless dedication, talent, and extensive knowledge of those who participated. Deep appreciation is extended to these individuals who include members of the Oversight Committee, members of the six expert panels, staff of the ADA, outside editors, and consultants. Heartfelt thanks are also offered to the entire range of communities of interest (both dental and non-dental) that provided their wisdom and constructive comments. Their input was invaluable in improving this report.

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FUTURE OF DENTISTRY

Today's Vision: Tomorrow's Reality
