

Is there a future for our profession?

In recent years some members of our profession have expressed the thought that there is no future in dentistry, or at least that the future appears bleak. Some have been rather vocal about it; a few even have stated that they could not advise their sons or daughters to enter dental school and prepare for a career in our profession. Besides general practitioners, some specialists—including pedodontists—also have voiced this opinion.

What are the reasons for these attitudes? Undoubtedly, there are many. Those of us who have been in the profession for many years are acquainted with practitioners, some of them apparently quite successful financially, who have never been truly happy in their profession; but, you can find persons in any field who are unhappy with their career choices. In recent years reduced busyness in some dental offices has magnified a feeling of unhappiness in practitioners. Recent graduates in particular, some heavily in debt from their education and confronted with the high cost of starting a practice, become disillusioned with their profession. This disillusionment undoubtedly grows when fewer patients seek dental care.

The busyness factor will change, however, as economic conditions in our country improve. Already there are encouraging signs. With the work force expanding and with dental insurance coverage again becoming available for those who temporarily lost it, the demand for dental care will increase. Dentists, especially general practitioners, already are reporting an increase in patients returning to the dental office. Many of these patients are in need of extensive care, perhaps due to several years of neglect and their inability to return for recommended checkup visits.

I, too, have concerns about the future of our profession, but only if those negative attitudes prevail.

There are many reasons to be "bullish" on

dentistry. The public has true respect for our profession. In recent years national survey polls consistently have ranked dentistry among the top professions insofar as respect and confidence are concerned.

In the April issue of the *Journal of The American Dental Association*, several members of the American Society of Retired Dentists reflected on their lives in the profession and commented on their retirement plans and experiences. They made many positive statements, including: "Self-employed people can work as long as they want or need to," and, "Dentists have an elite position in society whether they know it or not, and they are enjoying it." They felt that dentists can accumulate the necessary financial reserves to make retirement possible.

Not all members of our profession have an opportunity to teach in a dental school; those who are privileged to do so will agree that it is encouraging to work with today's students. In the past decade there has been a remarkable change in our students; they now come to us well prepared academically. The vast majority of them are motivated toward excellence in the classroom, laboratory, and clinics. They become active in student organizations such as the American Society for Geriatric Dentistry, the American Society of Dentistry for Children, and the student wing of the American Cancer Society. These students volunteer to participate in health education programs and also attend continuing education programs while they are still students.

A secure future for our profession is reflected in the attitude of today's students and in their professional behavior. The outlook is excellent!

