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To Be Young, A Woman and a Dentist

by DEBRA A. HAAS-ORO, D.M.D.*

It's two A.M. and the cytology book blurs before my eyes. My mind is not on tomorrow's exam. My tired eyes wander to the acceptance letters stacked neatly on the far corner of my desk. How will I tell my parents I'm not going to medical school?

The most important decision of my career is being made long before I attend my first anatomy lecture. Like most others, my parents dreamed of their child entering professional school. In my case, my parents (my dad a postal worker, my mom a full-time mother) wanted nothing less than medical school for their now grown-up little girl. Their thoughts are more understandable when I look back at my hometown. Mascoutah, Ill is a thriving metropolis of 5,000, up 3,000 since I was born. There, like most of my peers, I grew up in the farm-like atmosphere that surrounds most small towns in southwest Illinois. There, the most revered professional other than the clergyman was the town's physician. However, I knew I needed to create with my hands to be happy, and when it came down to a final decision, the hands won out. I would turn down the medical school acceptance to University of Illinois and attend dental school.

The decision to pursue dentistry was paradoxically easy yet very difficult. The easy part was knowing that being a dentist was what I wanted to do with my life. The difficult part was having no proven path to follow, no role model, no past history to guide me. The only dentists to whom I had access were male, and although they really helped, there was no female to look up to, even though such a role model would be no guarantee of success for myself. It would take just what it takes every other would-be professional to succeed, a lot of hard work and perseverance. Nonetheless, I wanted to remember that I wanted not only to be a good professional, but also to grow as a woman, wife and mother. I knew I would have to be flexible to attain such goals, especially since my goals outside of dentistry were so different from those of almost all my colleagues.

So with my mind made up and my parents unconvinced, I set out to decide where to go to school. I spent a lot of time deliberating the pros and cons, but in the end there was never a doubt. Harvard would be my choice because of the respect for and quality of education there, and because they would financially assist my education.

*Dr. Haas-Oro has recently completed a general residency at Lutheran Hospital in Brooklyn.



GENERAL PRACTICE—Debra A. Haas-Oro, left, wields the instruments of her profession.

Scholastic challenges

And so I was off to Boston to face not only the challenges of dental school but also the problems of "small-town Midwest farm girl meets big Northeast city." It was exciting living in a totally new environment and getting to know and study with people whose social and cultural experiences were vastly different from mine. I did well scholastically, even received the highest grade in the histology final among medical, dental, and Ph. D. students. But my aspirations changed, and I found I was more interested in a clinically oriented program. This prompted me to transfer to the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine. Retrospectively, that decision was a particularly happy and wise one for me.

My years at Penn gave me what I now consider one of the finest dental educations available in this country. Though a dental education in itself is fraught with demands and anxieties, I enjoyed this phase of my education. Needless to say, there were hurdles for me, not only as a student but as a female student without a role model. However, as a human being dealing with individuals, I overcame most problems in such a way that they rarely recurred. Being a woman in

what is traditionally a man's field made me even more determined to work hard and with persistence. I did not want to fail my own aspirations, and I wanted to make sure that my peers and instructors knew it was by no accident that I had been accepted into dental school.

COSTEP program

The school's three-month summer vacation schedule gave me the opportunity to pursue some sidelights of dentistry in which I had always been interested. During college I had been involved in research, so I applied to the COSTEP program in hopes of summer employment and experience in dentistry. Fortunately, I was accepted to the National Institute of Dental Research in Washington, D.C. to assist Doctors Gracely and Dubner in their human pain control studies. It was an enlightening and gratifying experience for me, not only as a dentist but as a person. Spending a summer in the nation's capital was exciting in itself.

The next summer between my junior and senior years, I continued in the COSTEP program, and the new locale helped me to expand my knowledge in a new direction. I spent the summer in a small peninsular village in Alaska. The dental clinic was situated in the small hospital that served Kotzebue along with several of the surrounding villages north of the Arctic Circle. Most of the patients could come to us for treatment, but occasionally we flew to neighboring villages with completely portable dental equipment. The experience of flying in a two-seater plane to treat these truly needy eskimos was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and it also allowed me to do dentistry on my own for the first time. I felt incredibly independent.

I returned to school to finish my senior year with added vigor and bright hopes for life after dental school.

Marriage plans

It was at this point that my social life had a big effect on my career decisions. I had already decided to stay on the East Coast and had applied to general practice residency programs when I became affianced. As fate would have it, we both were accepted to hospital programs in Brooklyn, so counting ourselves lucky, we arranged wedding plans, graduation, and moving to occur in the three short weeks before our programs began.

Serving residency

My one-year general practice residency at Lutheran Hospital provided many opportunities, the least of which was the time to improve the skills I had begun developing at Penn. More importantly, it was a time for growth and for learning to do daily procedures which had only been discussed in dental school, as well as many procedures which had never been discussed. The low socio-economic Hispanic area allowed me a plethora of dental procedures, along with some insight into the ethnic and social problems of the inner city. As the *barrio* was tough and the people often "street-wise," diagnosis and treatment were sometimes modified to fit the circumstances. Since we had no dental suite in the emergency room, middle-of-the-night emergencies presented obstacles. Hospital policy was to avoid treatment of a patient in the dental center after hours, when auxiliary help was not available. As a woman, this seemed only reasonable to me, but considering where our hospital was, it was just as risky for my male counterparts to treat a

female patient alone in the dental center. Of course, nocturnal dentistry was necessary at times, and it was in these instances that I became adept at thinking quickly yet cautiously in order to render comprehensive care in true emergencies.

During this year, my confidence and expertise in all phases of dentistry heightened, along with my ability to recognize my limitations. One of the unexpected yet rewarding consequences of the location was learning some "dental Spanish"; an extra special feeling came to me after successfully treating a frightened patient who had the added problem of a language barrier.

As the program was ending, I started looking toward the future to consider what I wanted to do after my training. My main goal had always been to be my own boss in private practice. This is why I had tried so diligently to prepare myself in dental school and residency. Having one's own private practice, I always felt, would bring me the most pressures, but it would also bring me the most personal satisfaction.

After residency

At the time, however, my aspirations had to be modified. The high cost of dental education and the subsequent high monthly payments on loans made immediate investment in a "take-over" (a purchased practice) or a new practice prohibitive. So, my husband and I decided to find a place where both of us would want to live, and where we could work in a practice to raise capital, and then find a practice in which to invest. It was interesting that, while being interviewed for an associate position, I was frequently asked if I was a pedodontist or if I didn't mind treating the children of the practice. I assume that the questioners felt a woman might have a psychological edge helping children to accept treatment, but truthfully, I don't enjoy pedodontics more than any other general practitioner. In fact, during my residency, I always enjoyed oral surgery the most, because we had two excellent oral surgeons on staff and because I found it one of the most exciting and intellectually interesting subjects not emphasized clinically in dental school. Endodontics, periodontics, and crown and bridge are also on that "most" list. This is one of the reasons I decided not to specialize, because there is such a variety of services to be rendered and skills to be enjoyed in general practice.

Conclusion

I have found that dentistry right now is not a very open field, but with persistence, I have always been engaged in a suitable position where open-minded respect and a willingness to learn were shared. Fortunately, I have been associated in two fine practices while I search for the right area for a practice of my own. Both practitioners for whom I have worked have taught me a great deal about dentistry in the private office. I now feel very confident that my husband and I have located the area where we want to settle, and I am looking forward to the realization of my ambitions.

Well-balanced happiness: that is how I would describe my life right now. I arrived at this satisfaction through a mixture of joys and sorrows just as anyone else does, but my particular road to dentistry was unique—not only because I am an individual but also because I happen to be a woman. My profession is not my whole world, but it is a very important part of it. It means a lot to me. □