

Dentists of the future

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When envisioning the future of our profession it is reasonable to imagine a sophisticated industry driven by streamlined value chains, tech-savvy dentists, futuristic care and an aging population becoming the financial core of our practices. Whilst this scenario may become an early reality in developed countries, our legacy of apartheid policies, a fragmented healthcare system and inequitable access to healthcare may result in a future for South African dentists that is uniquely different.

It is widely accepted that the global healthcare landscape is rapidly transforming, presenting opportunities to entrepreneurs, threats to the complacent and challenges to the *status quo*. In view of our legacy, our participation in the global village of care and our vulnerability to global developments, it is evident that an understanding of the key forces guiding the future will assist our profession in defining our own destiny.

Our future rests on understanding socio-demographic shifts and in tracking the expansion of South Africa's middle class, which presents the greatest opportunities. We are likely to see more diverse and aging patients presenting with co-morbidities who will want more and better information on dental health and treatment options. Their consumer habits may display an increasing reliance on technology and they may seek greater value from their spending.

Our young dentists play an integral role in navigating these shifts within the changing healthcare landscape and it is imperative that we understand, support and guide their needs and aspirations. It is not surprising that an increasing number of millennial (born between 1980 and 2000) dentists will be trained. Millennials generally value recognition, collaboration, transparency and career advancement. It is predicted that women will continue to enter the profession with a growing proportion preferring part-time work due to work-life balance.

Investments in new technology will raise the barrier for opening new dental practices. Coupled with mounting debt and changing demographics, these factors will alter the practice choices for new dentists. The trend towards larger, multi-site practices will continue, driven by pressures for smaller provider networks, defined practice patterns of new dentists and increased competition for patients. Health care reform with an increasing emphasis on outcomes and cost-effectiveness will encourage alternative models of dental care. Group practices including dental chains will increase while single-owner practices may decline. Millennial dentists will increasingly consider a career in dental corporates, given their need for flexibility.

The nature of oral disease is changing and the financing of dental care is in a state of flux. Payment for dental services is gradually shifting from third party funders to public coverage and personal out-of-pocket payments or a combination thereof. Funders will increasingly use more selective networks, demanding increased accountability through profiling measures, and pressuring providers to reduce costs. With the increased demand for value in dental care spending, practices will need to become more efficient. Changes in the health coverage system are harbingers of forthcoming changes in Dentistry. The National Health Insurance (NHI) will demand simpler and more standardized treatment protocols. Pressures are growing for an expanded dental team to provide preventive and restorative services. There will be a need to increase productivity and reduce chair time, which in turn will increase efficiency.

As an industry we are at an inflection point and ignoring the shifting landscape will be to lose control and allow others to determine the future of Dentistry. We are fortunate that SADA has had the foresight to create a platform to mobilize young dentists to shape our future. As the President of the Young Dentists Council (YDC) it has been an honour to lead a team that has developed and held true to the YDC's purpose of : "*Young dentists working together to nurture a brighter future*".

When reflecting on Youth Month and June 16 as Youth Day we must remember and acknowledge that the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow, let's groom them for success. Together, the YDC and the profession have an opportunity to proactively chart a course to influence our strategic direction.

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