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**STONY BROOK SCHOOL OF DENTAL MEDICINE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
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**“LOOKING BEYOND THE DENTAL CHAIR – A DENTIST’S ROLE IN A MUCH LARGER
WORLD”**

Thank you for that kind introduction, Dean Williams. And thank you for the important global leadership role you have taken in oral care. Your advocating for the inclusion of oral diseases at the U.N.’s non-communicable diseases summit in September 2011 was very important. Thank you to the distinguished Stony Brook School of Dental Medicine faculty and administration for the privilege of joining you at this very important event.

Let me begin by congratulating the 2013 Stony Brook School of Dental Medicine graduates and your families, whose support has been instrumental in helping you achieve this milestone. This is a tremendous achievement and the first step in what should be a long and successful career at a great time to be entering a great profession.

Let me take a little poetic license on this Charles Dickens quote and briefly share with you “my tale of two visits” to the dentist. And I hope that when you look back on this commencement address you will think of it as “the best of times” and not “the worst of times.”

My first tale of a visit goes back 33 years ago, in 1980, when I first joined Henry Schein. I went to a young dentist in a solo practice, who also was a member of the teaching faculty at a dental school in New York City. Mitch became a lifetime friend, and sadly passed away recently.

This is what the experience was like when I visited my dentist 33 years ago: Before my appointment I received a post card in the mail reminding me about my appointment. The dentist’s waiting room was filled with magazines. Mitch pulled out a folder filled with my old X-rays and dental records on the all too familiar dental note cards and reviewed my treatment history. The X-ray films had to be developed by the dental assistant in solutions that are not environmentally friendly. He made a gloopy impression of my teeth and mailed it to a dental lab. My crown was manually fabricated in the lab by a dental technician, and I had to come back two or more weeks later for my dentist to finish the dental work.

Let’s fast-forward 33 years to my second tale of a visit to my dentist. I went to my dentist last Saturday morning. She is a recent graduate from the same school where my old friend taught, and this is what the experience started like. I received an appointment reminder on my Blackberry. (Despite urging from my sons and daughters-in-law, I am still not using an iPhone for texting.)

Today’s dentist’s waiting room often shows interesting oral health videos on an HD video monitor, and information about community outreach programs the dentist supports. The dentist can review my complete dental history on an iPad. Digital X-rays can immediately be shown on a clinical workstation computer. The dental assistant can take my blood pressure and ask me several questions about my overall health. A quick oral cancer screening can be made.

My dentist's dental practice may be local, but her perspective is global. She is digitally connected to her patients and to her colleagues around the world so she stays on the leading edge of best practices in dentistry. She is using technology to expand her role in the total health care continuum.

Her focus clearly goes well beyond the dental chair to her role in a much larger world. Today's dentist has a solid understanding of both dental implants and CAD-CAM, where an immediate chair-side dental prosthetic can be fabricated and placed in an hour or so. Alternately, a scan of the patient's mouth can be taken and sent electronically to the lab for the digital fabrication of the prosthetic.

This is state-of-the-art dentistry today, and this is the exciting profession that you are entering in the summer of 2013. What a difference three decades makes! Dentists today must not only see their patients in the chair, but look well beyond the dental chair to a much larger world of digitally connected oral health care.

The changes in dentistry over the past 33 years have been enormous – completely reshaping the profession. But those changes will be eclipsed by the changes that you will see in dentistry during your practice career, whether you open a solo practice, join a large group practice, or are part of another segment of the dental profession. In fact, the “tools” I have just described probably will be obsolete in less than a decade.

So what is the best way to navigate these coming changes and put yourself and your practice where you want to be in the year 2046, 33 years from now? The answer to that question is “be open.” I have reminded dental graduates in the past of how important the word “open” will be to dentists in the years to come. Besides asking your patients to “open” their mouths more than 150,000 times during your career, you will most importantly need to keep your minds “open” to new ideas.

So here are six “be opens.”

First, be open to embracing new technology throughout your career. CAD-CAM, digital imaging and 3-D, digital dental prosthetic solutions, implants, milling centers, practice management tools, social media, and exciting technology-related tools that have not yet been invented. These will become as important to your practice as any dental tool on a tray in your clinic today. Constantly be open to new and improved technology solutions to provide comprehensive care to your patients, and I emphasize the words “comprehensive care.”

Which leads to the second “open” – be open to orienting your practice to your patients' *total health*. Be a leader in the larger health care team protecting the overall health of your patient. Be a strong advocate for the important role that dentistry plays in the continuum of care by collaborating with dental and medical colleagues. Oral infection or periodontal disease in an expectant mother can increase the risk of premature birth and low birth weight. Poor oral health and dental caries directly affect a child's nutrition, growth and weight gain. Periodontal disease in adults is linked to diabetes and heart disease. And oral cancer is the eighth most common form of cancer among men in the world and the most costly to treat. It is clear that there is an integral connection between oral health and total health.

Third, be open to adapting your practice to changes in the patient population. By 2042 those who trace their roots to the developing world will represent the majority of the United States population. The “minority” will be the “majority.” Learn to respect cultural differences, and make sure that your team reflects the faces of your patients.

Fourth, be open to partnership – do not try to do it alone. In a world built on networking and building relationships, the important consideration is not simply finding partners – it is finding the right partners. Be open to looking for professional and business partners who share your vision and commitment. Partners who are looking for a long-term relationship, not a short-term gain. Partners who will be there as your practice grows and evolves over the years. For those going into private practice remember that you will be operating a business to provide quality dental care, so select partners who can help you achieve this goal.

Fifth, be open to finding the right balance between your career and your personal life. As a young dentist you will be faced with many compelling challenges related to the use of your time. You want to apply the skills you have learned in school and build a successful practice. You also want to fulfill your obligations to your dental team. These are powerful inducements to work as hard as possible. But along the way it is critical to find time to be with your family and enjoy your success. This reminds us of why we are working so hard in the first place.

Sixth, be open to giving back to the community in a way that enriches your spirit. Benjamin Franklin was right when he wrote about enlightened self-interest – you really can “do well by doing good.” Donate some of your fees to support a local charity. Volunteer at a local clinic treating the underserved, such as Give Kids A Smile or a similar program. Be part of an oral health mission to a developing country. And let your patients know about the good work you are doing. You will get more out of giving than the cost of giving.

Finally, be totally open to enjoying your career! You are graduating from a great school, and entering a terrific profession at an exciting time.

Constantly be open to learning new technology; be open to embracing your role in total health; be open to adjusting your practice to changing patient demographics; be open to finding the right partners; and be open to balancing your professional and personal life and giving back to society.

And 33 years from now, when you look back on a long and successful career, you will know that by being open you made the most of every opportunity. You will know that you looked well beyond the dental chair to your role in a much larger world – to the tale of a great career in a great profession.

Thank you, again, and congratulations.