

Opinion

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# Organized Dentistry - Preserve the Past or Facilitate the Future



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## Opinion

According to numbers of business experts and pundits, scientists and social authorities, context is decisive. The current context of organized dentistry is chiefly “preservation.” No matter how virtuous their mission statement, how altruistic their public speaking, the obvious context from which they operate is preservation of the past. The past being independent solo practice.

There is an understandable and consistent effort to hold onto this past by attempting to retard the future. But, at some point, organized dentistry will need to realize, you can’t stop the future from happening. You can’t rewind the past. It has never worked that way. The future always wins.

The emerging context is merger, acquisition and consolidation. The new context is easily validated by the explosive growth of DSOs. The context in which is organized dentistry is trying to operate is independent solo practice. As in Newtonian physics, two contexts cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

Most of organized dentistry is made up of members who do not want the future to happen. Their current membership has had done exceptionally well operating in the old context; independent small business, fee-for-service model. Members made good money, they basically worked the days and hours they wanted, they could be their own boss, they had no oversight so they could basically do what they wanted. The future now emerging threatens all that.

When we talk about “organized dentistry” we’re talking about its political organizations whose executives, trustees and members do not want the future of consolidation to occur. We’re talking about state boards and boards of examiners who do not want this future to impact their view of how dentistry “should” be practiced and delivered. But organized dentistry is thickheaded to the proven truth; the future doesn’t care, the future will happen regardless of what organized dentistry feels, does or thinks.

Uber didn’t care about taxis. Cell phones didn’t care about payphones. Amazon didn’t care about shopping malls. The future doesn’t care - the future is going to happen anyway. And, the future in dentistry, like most in today’s world, will not be a direct

extension of the past. The future will not be more solo practices but larger and larger managed group practices - DSOs.

Forces shape the future. For example, the force of social media has changed dental marketing. The force of implants and digital radiography has changed clinical dentistry. The force of driverless vehicles will change commuting and trucking. The definition of force is strength or energy exerted or brought to bear: cause of change.

The forces impacting dentistry are now intensifying. These forces will cause numerous changes to dental practice and the dental industry. These forces have already caused some deformation as seen in the growth of DSOs at 20% and the shrinkage of solo practice to less than 60% of practices (Figure 1).

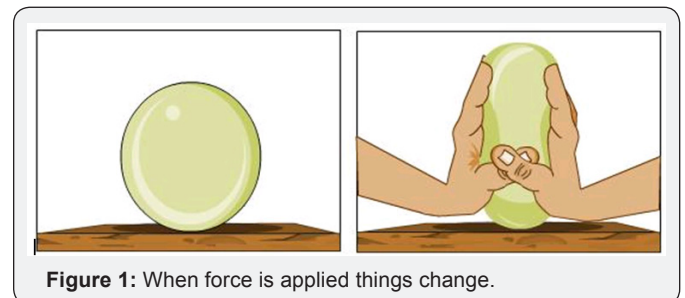


Figure 1: When force is applied things change.

These forces are becoming more and more potent, growing in strength and size, exerting greater and greater impact on dentistry. Using the metaphor of a hurricane, the eye of the hurricane is the profound shift in context - from small business to big business. The surrounding eye-wall of the hurricane is the tremendous influx of venture capital and consolidators, pushing forward the exponential growth of DSOs.

The rain-bands of the hurricane are horizontal integration, vertical integration, artificial intelligence, robotics, cloud computing, Big Data, electronic patient records, and genomics. Other rain-bands of the hurricane are lack of access for 47% of the population, direct connection to systemic diseases, dentistry becoming more and more seen as part of primary care, demand for midlevel providers – dental therapists, shift in reimbursement

from the fee-for-service model to the pay-for-performance model. The outer rain-bands are the dental lobbyists from organizations such as the ADSO, talking to the congress about dentists of organized dentistry having a monopoly on dentistry preventing better costs and greater access. All, occurring over warmer waters of the seemingly unstoppable increase in spending on healthcare.

What organized dentistry ought to consider is rather than trying preserve the past of highly fragmented solo practices, preparing their members for the new future. Bitching and moaning have no power. Complaining, faulting, blaming have no power. Condemning, criticizing, accusing have no power. Wake up, you can't stop the future. (Watch video).

Organized dentistry in many states are trying to desperately to stop DSOs from entering their borders. They are attempting to exert as much onerous control over DSOs, hoping to prevent them from coming into their state. But the forces stated above will overtake their confrontation. DSOs have the leadership, money

and 'smarts' to create the conditions that can fully adapt to the changes these forces are producing, whereas solo practice cannot.

The future cannot be stopped. The train has left the station. The future is going to happen regardless about how organized dentistry feels about it. My recommendation to organized dentistry, "get on board." Educate your members. Create pathways for them to succeed in this new future. The past is quickly eroding as the new future emerges.

If you're not helping make it right, then stop complaining about it being wrong. If you are refusing to light any candles, don't complain about being in the dark.

If organized dentistry cannot adapt to the changes caused by these continuously increasing forces, and assist their membership to succeed in the new future, they will eventually lose power and go out of existence. Organizations that stay relevant, stay in existence. Organizations that don't stay relevant, go out of existence. What remains relevant is context always dependent.



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