Ortho-perio:
45 years in retrospect

I am honored to be asked to reflect on my 45 years of professional life since entering dental school at Temple University in 1966. Several events happened while I was at Temple that had lasting effects. First, I became interested in periodontology and decided to pursue this field at the graduate level. At the time, my roommate was an orthodontics resident named Jim Fitzpatrick. I was fascinated with what orthodontic treatment could accomplish, but I was disappointed in the frequently poor hygiene, gingival inflammation, and decalcification associated with fully banded appliances. I became aware of a new program that combined periodontology and orthodontics at the University of Pennsylvania. I met Dr Steve Brown, a student in the program, and realized this combination was what I really wanted to pursue. I saw an opportunity to incorporate these two clinical areas and work toward minimizing the periodontal problems of my orthodontic patients. In 1970, I entered the periodontics program at Penn under the guidance of Drs D. Walter Cohen and Morton Amsterdam. One of my classmates in periodontics, Robert Vanarsdale, also became interested in this combined area. As many of you know, he also devoted his lifetime toward pursuing this periodontics and orthodontics relationship.

I started my orthodontic training after completing periodontics training in 1972. At this time, I had the opportunity to learn from the most influential teacher in my career, Dr James Ackerman, who was the chair of the Department of Orthodontics at Penn. Dr Ackerman was willing to work with my many rough edges and able to solidify and inspire my strong desire to be as good as I could be. The greatest lesson Dr Ackerman taught me was to think outside the conventional dogma and formulate new ideas based on new paradigms. In addition to teaching me the importance of being a good teacher, he also taught me to have the courage to follow through on my evolving ideas of the relationship of periodontics and orthodontics.

After serving 2 years in the US Army, I spent 5 years at the University of Florida as an assistant professor. Another important role model for me was Dr Richard Mackenzie, under whom I studied with the goal of improving my teaching skills in a special program he created (that led to my master’s degree in education in 1981). During this time, I began a series of studies of periodontic-orthodontic relationships and published my first paper in 1978 in the Journal of Periodontology. That paper focused on how retraction of anterior teeth could improve the periodontal status of teeth in labioversion. My conclusion was that any soft tissue grafting should wait until after the potentially favorable effect of the orthodontic treatment. At that time, the current paradigm was to graft areas prior to orthodontics treatment, which proved contrary to the outcome of my study.

My next faculty position was at the Department of Orthodontics at the University of California, San Francisco, under Dr Bob Isaacson. Dr Isaacson was another role model for me. He showed me that a department can achieve the freedom to pursue new ways to achieve more independent management than the conventional dental school usually had, as long as patients were well cared for and residents became expert clinicians who understood the literature.
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My next position was chair of the Department of Orthodontics at the University of the Pacific in San Francisco under Dean Art Dugoni in 1996. It was Art’s support and guidance that helped me develop my current approach to teaching and administration—the humanistic model. The humanistic model is a set of core values: respecting our students, honoring them with our support as teachers, and providing them a positive environment to be the best they can be. Art’s now famous words that inspired so many people in dentistry are, “At Pacific, we grow people, and along the way, they become doctors.”

During the past 45 years, I have tried to be a better clinical scientist. My most influential teacher in this regard has been Dr. Sheldon Baumrind. Shelly and I first started working together at UCSF in the mid 1980s and continued to work together after we both came to Pacific in 1996. Shelly showed me the value of rigorous clinical research in experimental design, analysis of measurement errors, critical interpretation of results, and consideration of sources of bias.

One of the most significant events in my career was the opportunity to explore a new way of straightening teeth without fixed appliances. In 1997, I met the young and energetic group of people who were to develop the Invisalign appliance. I was doubtful that much tooth movement could be achieved with clear plastic, yet intrigued with the idea of helping to develop a more hygienic, esthetic, and comfortable appliance. In the years since, I have learned it is not easy to do something new and different from what was done before, but I have never regretted my decision to try to develop and improve treatment with this appliance. Some have wondered how I could continue pursuing this path of research when there was such a negative reaction from so many of my peers, especially during the first 5 years of working with Invisalign. I thank my critics because they motivated me to continually improve and develop this appliance.

I feel so fortunate to be a teacher in a profession that often provides a life-changing experience for our patients.

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