Letter to the Editor

Educational Value of the UConn Biodontics Program: Students’ Perspectives

Dear Dr. Alvares:

In a recent article in the Journal of Dental Education (Iacopino AM, “The Influence of ‘New Science’ on Dental Education: Current Concepts, Trends, and Models for the Future,” J Dent Educ 2007;71[4]:450–62), the Biodontics program at the University of Connecticut (UConn) School of Dental Medicine was discussed as an example of a model for dental education of the future. We were selected to participate in the 2006 Biodontics program at UConn, and we are writing to report and comment on our personal experience as Biodontics Fellows.

Biodontics refers to a dental practice that uses bio-based materials to repair, restore, and replace teeth and other craniofacial structures (J Am Coll Dent 2006;73:32–4). The Biodontics program, funded by the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), is part of an initiative to identify educational programs to promote the transfer of new bio-based discoveries from the research laboratory to dental practice. This program was originated and developed by Dr. Edward F. Romsando at the University of Connecticut School of Dental Medicine. For the 2006 and 2007 programs, thirty dental students, from the D1, D2, and D3 classes of UConn, New York University, University of Southern California, Marquette University, and our school, Howard University, were selected to attend. The class was divided into six teams of five students each.

The Biodontics program was an intense one-month program that met five days per week from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The program format included guest speakers, equipment demonstrations, and field trips to nearby dental manufacturing facilities. One interesting aspect of the format was that guest speakers did not lecture. In fact, these sessions were more like conversations, with students asking most of the questions. Topics for discussion were wide-ranging, including dentistry’s history, current challenges, future trends, and even discussions of malpractice cases. Some high points included a presentation by a designer of dental offices followed by a tour of some offices he had completed. Most discussions were accompanied by hands-on demonstrations. At the end of the marketing presentation, for example, we were required to develop a marketing plan for a new toothbrush.

By the end of the program, we had been shown aspects of the dental profession that most dental students never see in their four years of school. This was especially eye-opening and beneficial for first- and second-year dental students since understanding the dental profession three-dimensionally is critical in determining future career paths. Tips on practice management, new dental products, and important contact information for key persons in the industry gave us practical information that we can use when we start to manage our own practices.

The Biodontics program also provided an unexpected benefit: the delightful opportunity to become acquainted with dental students from several other dental schools across the country. These interactions allowed for discussion on a wide variety of subjects and the sharing of ideas about the future of our profession. Not only did the program foster communication within the dental student community, but it also strengthened our understanding of teamwork. From the program’s emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship, we learned to respond more sensitively and more critically to various opportunities within the profession. All of these are essential skills that we will need to ensure success regardless of our future career paths.

Now, as senior and junior students, it is clear to us that the Biodontics program provided us with a perspective on the dental profession that included knowledge and information we have not been exposed to in our dental education but which we believe will enhance our future practice and the profession of dentistry. As a new concept in dental education, we believe the Biodontics program fills an unmet need in the education of dental students and that Biodontics should be incorporated into the core dental curriculum of every dental school.
All signers below are from Howard University College of Dentistry.
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