Work Harder, Work Smarter...and Work Together

As I begin this year as president of the GLAO, my first task is to thank our outgoing president, Aron Dellinger, for the great leadership that he provided as GLAO president over the past year. If you have had the privilege of knowing Aron, you know that he is a passionate advocate for our profession. He leads with thoughtfulness and enthusiasm. He has set the bar high, and I will work hard to show my appreciation for what I've learned from him over the past year.

Several interesting challenges face our profession currently:

The lines are blurring on specialty designation.
I recently attended the ADA meeting in Denver, where the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct was amended. Two significant changes came out of the amendment. First, it allows orthodontists to practice as general dentists if they so desire. While many of us love the practice of orthodontics and would never consider this option, new graduates facing crippling student debt are sometimes forced to supplement their income by practicing general dentistry. The second outcome of the amendment was to permit dentists to announce as specialists recognized in their jurisdictions, even if it's not one of the nine dental specialties recognized by the ADA. This is the result of court cases that have challenged the ability of the ADA to be the sole body that designates what is and is not a specialty field of dentistry. All of these changes will have the potential effect of causing more confusion for the general public, as they try to decide who is the best provider for their dental services, including orthodontic treatment.

There is a busyness problem in dentistry. In addition to the recent legislative changes, a significant trend that has been identified by the ADA Health Policy Institute is the decrease in utilization of dental services since 2003. General dentists aren't as busy as they used to be, and empty chairs and declining incomes have led some general dentists to seek additional procedures to offer in their practices. New technologies have sometimes given general dentists the impression that they can offer specialty services that are comparable to those provided by a specialist. As specialists that went through years of training to gain the knowledge base that we have, and that have honed our skills through practicing our specialty day in and day out, we know that no fancy technology gadget, weekend course, or clever marketing training can never replace what we know and can do as specialists. The problem, however, is that the general public doesn't know this.

So now that I've totally depressed you, let's talk about how we can combat the challenges facing our profession...
The answer can be found by putting a new twist on the familiar saying...“Work smarter, not harder”. I believe that our most effective approach is to “work smarter
AND harder”, as we view the challenges that we face as opportunities to reconnect with our professional associations and challenge ourselves to be the best practitioners that we can be.

**Work Smarter**
With increasing pressure by insurance companies to pay less per case and to put patients into preferred provider networks, and increased competition, the name of the game in the future will be to cut expenses and increase efficiency in our practices. This doesn't mean that we want to lower our standards. In contrast, our goal needs to be to produce the best results possible while utilizing the most efficient process to get there. This can best be accomplished by:

1) *Astute management of our cases* - Through careful diagnosis and monitoring of treatment progress, we can ensure that we have developed the best plan for our patients, and are identifying compliance issues early so that we can achieve a good result in a reasonable amount of time. This enhanced level of organization benefits both the patient and the practice, as we don't jam our schedules with frustrated patients that are past their expected completion date.

2) *Utilizing technology where it makes sense* - There is never a shortage of new, expensive, technology toys waiting to be sold to orthodontists, but it is only through thorough careful evaluation and incorporation of technology that improvements in patient outcomes and the treatment process are seen. The AAO midwinter meeting taking place in Fort Lauderdale on February 10-11 is entitled “Technology: Balancing Profit, Lifestyle, and Patient Care”, and will serve to address this very issue. Consider going to this meeting to help navigate the technology to decide if it will help improve treatment results and efficiency in your practice.

3) *Better management of our teams* - Continually training and pushing our teams to deliver the best care possible for our patients. An abundance of both business information and clinical training information is available on the AAO website.

**Work Harder**
To help patients and parents decide on the best provider for their orthodontic treatment, it important to get our message out to the public that “orthodontists have the training and expertise to be the provider of choice for orthodontic care”. While we have a national public awareness program in effect, the reality is that this messaging is most impactful when it occurs at a local grassroots level. The cumulative effect of all member orthodontists initiating a grassroots effort to get this message out in their individual practices would be powerful. There is a wealth of resources available on the AAO website to help make this happen in your practice. These resources were developed by a professional marketing team, and can be easily customized for your practice.
Work Together
Through my volunteer efforts on the local, state, regional, and national levels, I see many dentists and orthodontists that are stressed out about changes that they see in dentistry. They are sometimes disillusioned with our professional associations, and complain that the associations aren't doing enough to help them in their practices. There are two common themes that I see in the most nervous, and critical ones: they are not involved, and they don't use the resources available from their associations. When I ask, “Have you been on the website lately? Do you use any of the products or services? Have you been to a meeting?”... more often than not, the answer is “no”. My position is that it is wildly unfair to criticize something that you don't really know much about, and that we are stronger as both individual practitioners and as a profession if we work together to take advantage of our collective wisdom and create the future that we want for our orthodontic profession.

In summary, I would encourage you to view the challenges that we face as opportunities, to use the abundance of resources available through the GLAO and the AAO to improve your treatment efficiency and results and to get the message out that the best orthodontics is done by trained orthodontists, and to connect or reconnect with YOUR associations, the GLAO and the AAO by attending a meeting, volunteering for a leadership position, and recruiting a new member to join. Connecting with other members at meetings is a great way to gain knowledge and build relationships. Our next GLAO Annual Session is September 14-17th in New Orleans. It will be a combined session with the Midwestern and Southwestern Societies, and will feature speakers David Sarver and Clark Colville, among others.

I am delighted and confident to take on this challenge due to the fact that I will be working alongside the wonderful people that serve in the GLAO, and excellent executive management team that we have. I would encourage you to reach out to me to share any concerns or ask about volunteer opportunities. I can be reached at dafortho@yahoo.com or by cell at 614-205-8833. Please don't hesitate to contact me.