An expanding but uncertain economy presents each of us with new challenges in both our personal lives and in our pursuit of financial freedom. Dentistry is a great profession and it is rewarding in many ways. I am reminded however, that it is not the profession my father entered in the 1940’s, and it is also different from the one I entered in the 1970’s.

In order to meet new patient demands like cosmetics, dentists have begun to explore new areas of practice once considered the sole domain of specialists. New and innovative restorative techniques now make it much easier for the general practitioner to add orthodontics to his/her practice. An expansion of the services offered to our patients is where our growth will occur, not in the acquiring of a larger patient base.

I continue to hear and read about the importance of expanding into these new areas and in particular, that of fixed prosthodontics. Many so-called occlusion courses are nothing more than restoration courses designed to make the participant think he/she will greatly expand his/her practice (and income). However, we all know that too many patients resist the “extreme makeover” regime and the attendant cost of such a treatment plan. These patients usually begin with a few cosmetic improvements but rarely do they complete a truly effective course of comprehensive treatment.

For practitioners wanting to expand their practice into new areas, orthodontics may well be the most natural and profitable option available. With a shortage of specialists and a population that wants the best for its children, orthodontics is an easy sell. With reasonable fees (avg. $4500 - $5000) and generally available insurance coverage, treatment plans are affordable and readily accepted as a basic component of good heath care.

Orthodontics is an established discipline of dentistry and is widely accepted by the public as providing a valuable service. It represents a growth area for the dental practice and is very attractive to the entire staff. It means additional income for those who take assistant training and also provides an opportunity for career advancement. Bleaching and other cosmetic services are easily integrated with orthodontics to become part of a total package of esthetic enhancements.

Additional reasons for incorporating orthodontics into your practice.

~ Economics – typical profit is 50% - 55% of revenue per case
~ Collections average nearly 100% and some practitioners have developed innovative methods that include a large pre-payment.
~ Average chair time for the experienced clinician with trained assistants is 2 1/2 – 3 ½ hours per patient. This is the entire treatment time!
~ Dental assistants can perform expanded functions in most states and can be trained for expanded duties.
~ Comprehensive orthodontic training courses allow the practitioner to select simple cases at first and gradually expand his/her case load and difficulty of cases. After completing an 18-24 month program, the doctor will have developed the skills necessary to treat most cases. In the meantime, he/she will have learned to recognize and thus refer difficult cases he/she is not ready for to another doctor for proper treatment.
~ Interceptive treatment prevents your patient from suffering through a childhood of abnormal growth. Waiting on normal dentition to develop only allows compromise treatment later on that may include multiple extractions, TMJ treatment, and facial jaw surgery.

~ It is not uncommon for GP’s to start 50-60 cases per year while more aggressive practices start 100 or more. Multi-practitioner groups often generate 200 or more new cases per year. This translates into hundreds of thousands of dollars of additional revenue that otherwise would be referred out of your office.

~ Several years ago, Universal Dynamics Orthodontics in Minneapolis commissioned a study of AAFO members (mostly GPs). They were asked various orthodontic questions including the effect orthodontics had to their bottom line. General practitioners who had incorporated orthodontics into their practice for five or more years indicated as much as 50% of their income was now derived from orthodontics.

Orthodontic continuing education programs remain quite affordable and the time out of the office is very limited. Most classes are held on week-ends and competition has kept costs reasonable for even young dentists. The average tuition cost for a multi-session program is around $3000 plus another $1500 for supplies. A special x-ray Cephalogram attachment is required for existing equipment and this adds another $2000 or so. Further training includes monitoring of the aforementioned course, selection of four Masters Series courses, several Enhancement Series courses, and study club meetings in your area. Successful practices send dental assistants to special training sessions at some additional expense but this is a very worthwhile investment. Your profit from just a few ortho cases will cover the entire training costs.

When you have decided you are going to expand your practice, you should carefully study the benefits of adding orthodontics. Do some research by asking friends or requesting references from doctors that have attended our programs. Consult with your office associates and even ask your current patients if they would like yours to be a one-stop office.

Orthodontic training will not overwhelm you but it will require some effort on your part. I’m quite sure you’ll find the experience most gratifying and that you will be very glad you did it.