

GAINING EXPERIENCE IN TEACHING COMMUNITY DENTISTRY*

By Chester W. Douglass, D.D.S., M.P.H.,** and
Elof O. Petterson, D.D.S., M.P.H.***

From their personal participation, these two dentists recommend development of sites in which students of dental public health can gain practical experience for teaching community dentistry in a university.

Eight years have passed since Blackerby¹ asked the question, "Why not a department of social dentistry?" Approximately 20 dental schools have responded by creating departments or sections of community, social, preventive, or public health dentistry.² A few of these departments now have attained maturity. One example is the Dental Public Health Section in the Department of Behavioral Science, School of Dentistry, State University of New York at Buffalo, that provides a comprehensive field-experience for graduate students in dental public health. The purpose of this report, hence, is to answer Blackerby's question. Because of the increasing opportunities for public health dentists to gain employment in departments of social dentistry, the development of similar departments will be defended as sites for graduate students to secure experience in teaching community dentistry.

The Department of Behavioral Science in the School of Dentistry at Buffalo was not started until 1967. The Department, as its name indicates, however, consists of two sections, behavioral science and dental public health and the number of staff-members in this Department has grown rapidly. The staff now includes one full professor with a joint appointment in the Department of Psychology, two associate professors, one with a joint appointment in the Department of Psychology, four assistant professors, three with joint appointments, one in the Department of Psychology, one in the Department of Sociology, and one as Dental Director of the Erie County Health Department. Four of these staff-members hold the degree of Ph.D. The staff also includes two graduate students in psychology and six research-assistants.

Programs of the Public Health Section

The present objective of the Dental Public Health Section is to develop a balanced program of teaching, research, and community service. Teaching is directed toward preparation of dentists for an active role in community health affairs that may lead to oral health services for the total community. Research currently is attempting to establish such parameters as need, demand, resources, new systems for the delivery of health services, and better information about the social, motivational, and behavioral aspects of dental care.

Teaching

In addition to the formal activities of teaching, the Dental Public Health Section has begun a pilot-program which is entitled the "Student Summer Program in Community

*A report prepared by two graduate students of dental public health while attending the School of Public Health of The University of Michigan in a curriculum that included field education at the School of Dentistry, State University of New York, at Buffalo.

**Engaged in research in Public Health Practice at The University of Michigan, 122 South First Street, Ann Arbor 48104.

***Division of Dental Health, Education and Facilities Branch, U.S. Public Health Service, 8120 Woodmont Avenue, Bethesda, Maryland 20014.

Orientation.” The program is carried out in cooperation with the Section on Health Education of the County Health Department. The dental students are assigned individually to staff-members of the Department who make house-calls on the impoverished population of the black ghetto. Dental and Medical Problems are discussed with the families visited to stimulate constructive action in improving their health by utilization of the few services available in the area.

A program to utilize the Student Oral Health Center as an educational facility also is under development. The Student Oral Health Center is located in the Student Health Center to provide diagnostic, educational, and preventive dental services for students at the University. Each dental student will be assigned to the clinic for one week during his senior year.

The third teaching program includes a graduate course in field-experience during the spring half-term for students of dental public health from the School of Public Health at The University of Michigan.

This field-experience for the graduate students will be expanded from seven weeks to three and one-half months. The Section also provides a 12-month residency in dental public health.

Research

The current projects of research of the Section of Dental Public Health include such studies as

- (1) Evaluation of Medicaid;
- (2) Continuing education;
- (3) Ecology and typology of dental practice in Erie County;
- (4) Utilization of dental auxiliaries;
- (5) Quality of dental care; and the
- (6) Evaluation of the Student Summer Program in Community Orientation.

Services

The current services provided by the Section in Dental Public Health are (1) Diagnostic, educational, and preventive services at the Student Oral Health Center; and (2) Health education and counseling for families in a limited area of the black ghetto of Buffalo.

Field-experience for Graduate Students of Public Health

The resources necessary for a comprehensive field-experience in the teaching of dental public health are those just described, since they all pertain to teaching or research or programs of community service. The Department at Buffalo provides an adequate staff, facilities for study and learning, and the funds necessary to maintain a responsible field-agency. These resources and the current programs provide a propitious setting in which to fulfill the objectives of field-experience in teaching dental public health. These objectives now will be listed:*

- (1) to gain appreciation of the realities of practice, the challenges presented, and the constraints under which action takes place;
- (2) to integrate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and methods through application to specific situations that arise in operating a department of community dentistry;
- (3) to test the applicability of theory and develop a critical, questioning approach to both practice and theory;

*Adapted from *Guidelines for the Evaluation of New and Revised Field-courses*: Report of the Subcommittee on Field-education of the Committee on Instruction. Rev., Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, School of Public Health, 1967. 20p. mimeog. (p. 4)

- (4) to gain skill and competence through supervised practice in the performance of tasks characteristic of departments of community dentistry;
- (5) to develop professional identification with colleagues and other members of the team for dental education;
- (6) to understand the needs and reactions of the dental student, the dental faculty, and the administration of the dental school, and to develop the skills necessary for working effectively with all of them.

The field-education of the reporters took place between May 1 and June 20, 1968, and was organized into three major areas: teaching, research, and community orientation.

Experience in Teaching

The trainees participated in the course on dental public health for the sophomore dental students. All classes were attended and each trainee was assigned to prepare and present one lecture. One lectured on "Social and Economic Factors in Dental Care" and the other lectured on "Motivation of, and Behavior for Dental Care." Because of the innovative atmosphere within the Section, many formal and informal staff meetings were devoted to improvement of the content of the curriculum and the methods of teaching this content. The trainees also engaged in preparing, correcting, and grading the final examination.

Experience in Research

The program of research in the Section on Public Health has developed rapidly. The supervisor of research, who works with the trainees possesses the degree of Ph.D. in sociology and is responsible for much of the design of the studies now in progress. The trainees spent time in study and practice of several different aspects of the current projects. Their activities included sampling procedures, collection of data, coding, tabulation, analysis, interpretation, and writing reports.

Orientation to a Community

The Director of the Dental Division of the Erie County Health Department, holding a joint-appointment with the School of Dentistry, introduced and oriented the trainees to a local public health agency. A second connection with community health services was developed through the Student Summer Program of the Section in cooperation with the County Health Educator. The trainees participated in the development of the program, but limitations in the time available made active participation in the orientation impossible. When the field-experience is expanded to three and one-half months, participation in the health activities of the community can become equivalent in educational value to that of teaching and research.

A Summary

Professional excellence in dental public health depends so much on the successful integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that field-experience should provide the arena in which these three elements meet for the maturation of the student in dental public health. Provision of field-experience which is relevant to the eventual activities of students, hence, becomes a crucial concern. Because of the expanding role that public health is assuming in schools of dentistry, an increasing number of dentists, who have obtained the degree of M.P.H., will become associated with departments of preventive or community dentistry. Field-education in such departments, instead of traditional public health agencies, therefore, provides a logical mechanism for gaining experience first-hand in the activities of teaching, research, and service as a potential educator. This report points out experiences which have been found particularly useful to trainees.

References

1. Blackerby, P. E., Jr. Why not a department of social dentistry? *J. Dent. Educ.*, 24:197-200, Sept. 1960.
2. Sanders, Edith R. Current status of departments of social dentistry. *J. Dent. Educ.*, 30:354-8, Dec. 1966.