

RECRUITING QUALITY OPTOMETRIC STUDENTS

There is presently a good deal of concern regarding the drop in applications for admission to the schools and colleges of optometry. We are not alone in this situation; medicine, dentistry and podiatry are experiencing a similar decline. Dentistry has been hardest hit with the result that two of its colleges have recently been closed. Valid reasons have been put forth to account for the downturn; the first effects of a declining high school enrollment that will continue to the close of the decade, the high cost of tuition, and the decrease in the number of college students taking science courses prerequisite for the health care professions. Dwelling on these reasons and uncovering others are productive only if they are things over which we can exert control. It's similar to looking for the factors responsible for a drop in gross income in one's practice; if the reason is that recall notices are not being made in a timely fashion, direct remedial action can be taken. However, if a declining economy and local unemployment are the cause, the practitioner must accept these as things she can't control and then deal with the problem itself. Such is the case with the decline in the number of applicants. In a presentation to the House of Delegates of the American Optometric Association (AOA) this past June, Dr. Barry Barresi, Dean of Academic Affairs at the State University of New York, State College of Optometry, made a number of key points about this issue.

Perhaps the most important one to appreciate is that the need is not for additional seats to be made available for the entering classes, but rather for an increased number of applications for the existing seats. Indeed, he pointed out that, unlike several of the other health care professions, a recent report gave evidence that the supply and need for optometrists is currently in balance. If the quantity of applications continues to decline, a "ripple effect" will occur that will ultimately damage the profession's image and ability to continue the progress toward its rightful place as a major health care provider. The unique position we hold as the eye and visual care profession trained to utilize both the structural and functional-behavioral models of vision, and consequently offer the public options of care not available elsewhere, will be jeopardized. Only by maintaining the present level of quantity and quality of students can we continue on the path that has so enhanced the way the public views us and to deliver an increasingly diversified and higher level of service and visual care. Dr. Barresi called for the AOA to commit resources to create another "Operation Manpower" similar to the effort of the 1960s. The Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO) is also quite concerned over the decline in applicants and will undoubtedly take steps either in concert with AOA or alone. The first sign of action is that the

new President of the AOA, Dr. John "Bucky" Gazaway, has identified this problem as a priority for his administration.

It is appropriate that these two organizations have recognized and are planning to ameliorate this problem. The AOA, as the national representative of the profession, is cognizant that a decline in the number of optometrists would seriously impair our ability to provide the care that an increasingly older population of Americans will require. ASCO, as representative of optometric education, is aware of the threat that a decreased applicant pool will pose to the very existence of some of the schools or colleges. The other alternative would be to lower admission standards; this would ultimately have a negative effect on the

continued on page 153



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quality of care the profession provides. The plan of action is clear. Steps must be taken to increase the number of applicants while maintaining the caliber of students we have been fortunate enough to attract over the past two decades. I have no doubt that the efforts of AOA and ASCO will be effective to a significant degree. They have previously shown the organizational ability to develop excellent public relations and marketing programs to achieve specific goals. However, I believe that this problem will not be solved solely by media or organizations. The most potent force will be the individual practicing optometrist utilizing the marketing devices that the organizations make available. I stress the term "practicing" because he has an advantage that most administratively or academically based optometrists lack; the latter two groups are generally not in personal contact with prospective candidates on a daily basis. In several terms on the admissions committee at SUNY, I became increasingly aware of the role played by practicing optometrists in guiding quality candidates to the profession. I became convinced that those who applied because of the efforts of their personal optometrist were, as a group, well informed about the intricacies of the profession, the pros and cons, the battles won and the battles they'll need to fight. Further, they were knowledgeable about the realities of what it's like to be an optometrist as practitioner, member of the profession and member of the community. I'm convinced that this type of orientation is an essential ingredient to the making of a quality student and ultimately a quality practitioner. We have a history of not being complacent and of being action oriented when we're threatened or when we've determined that an expansion of our scope of practice is in the public's and profession's mutual interests. We've been successful in these regards because of efforts at the grass root level; the letters and phone calls to state legislators and the visits to state capitols. The plan has generally been that the optometric organizations do the ground work and then, at the appropriate time, the practitioners do their parts.

This same strategy should be effective to solve the problem of decreasing applicants. However, in this instance, letters, phone calls and trips to the state capital will not be necessary. Rather, the role of the practicing optometrist will take place in the office and usually at chair-side. It will require that he or she view high school and college-age patients, or parents of these individuals, as well as patients who are receptive to career change, as potential candidates. If the individual shows interest, the optometrist should be prepared to spend time explaining the profession both verbally and with the aid of printed material.

We all have a stake in the profession's future. The lack of sufficient and qualified students will, in the near future, negatively effect the saleability of existing practices, the availability of associate practitioners and our ability to negotiate with the federal and state governments as well as third party providers. If every reader of this article produces one quality candidate each year, these aspects of the future will be assured. This will require that the optometrist be constantly aware of the problem and show a willingness to spend time with the prospective applicant. However, it should be a labor of love, and the results extremely gratifying. There is the opportunity to help the profession, one's self, and be instrumental in guiding another human being into a gratifying and rewarding way of life.

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Editor-in-Chief

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