‘American dentistry at its best is remarkable’

Dr. Harold C. Slavkin shares his thoughts on what’s good about dentistry today and what’s needed from Washington

By Fred Michmershuizen, Online Editor

Dr. Harold C. Slavkin is the 2009 recipient of the American Dental Association’s Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Dental Research. Established in 1985 and presented by the ADA once every three years, the award honors individuals who contribute to the advancement of the profession of dentistry or who help improve the oral health of the community through basic or clinical research.

Slavkin, a noted policymaker, educator and researcher served as dean of the University of Southern California School of Dentistry from August 2000 until his retirement in December 2008.

He is currently on sabbatical, but he plans to return to USC in early 2010 to resume being part of the Center for Craniofacial Molecular Biology (of which he is the founding director) and teaching in the graduate school and dental school.

Before becoming dean at USC, Slavkin served as the sixth director of the National Institute of Dental.

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Texting during treatment a problem

More than four out of five dentists surveyed by the Chicago Dental Society revealed that patients send and receive text messages on their cell phones while receiving dental care.

The survey was conducted from July 16–25 via e-mail and among dentists in the Chicago Dental Society’s Facebook Fan Page.

In addition to the dentists who said their patients regularly text in the dental chair, 46 percent said this habit hampers their ability to provide care. The high number of dental chair texters is also surprising, given that 32 percent of the dentists indicated they have a cell phone/mobile device policy posted in a visible location in their office.

“We have signs up in the waiting room and directly in front of where the patient sits stating that they need to turn off their phones, but most simply ignore them,” said one respondent.

But not every dentist views texting...
Excellence in Dental Research, which is one of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). He is past president of the American Dental Research Association and a member of the International Association for Dental Research.

Slavkin, who has been called by ADA President Dr. John S. Findley “one of dentistry’s most influential and forward-thinking leaders,” spent a few moments with Dental Tribune discussing his thoughts on dentistry, the current state of affairs in our nation’s capital and what he does in his spare time.

You are being honored by the ADA with the Gold Medal Award for dentistry? It sounds trite, but the mouth is part of the body. From my perspective, comprehensive health care must be available for all people of all ages and must include mental, vision and oral health, with an emphasis upon prevention.

While I worked in Washington as director of the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research at the NIH, I had the unique opportunity to be a small part of the Surgeon General’s Report “Oral Health in America,” which was released in May 2000.

In that report we learned that 110 million Americans did not have dental insurance and that there were enormous oral health disparities according to socioeconomic determinants. We need to find a way for all Americans to experience optimal oral health, especially children under 5 and our elderly.

In your view, what does the future hold for general dentists? If I look beyond the current economic crisis that has challenged all of society, domestic and international, the future of our oral health profession is very bright and filled with enormous opportunities. The emerging science, technology and patient needs of all ages will truly enhance our profession’s future.

We know a lot about your work and your professional life, but what is something people might be surprised to know about you? What do you do for fun? Fun is being with my wife, children and grandchildren in essentially any venue. Fun is doing watercolor painting. Fun is sailing our boat “Winnie” and having the “Zen” experience of being on the Pacific Ocean. Fun is learning. Fun is being a societal evil. Dr. Gissy Furusho, a pediatric dentist in Chicago, said her young teen patients have mastered texting to the point that they don’t even have to look down at their phone keyboard during treatment.

“This may surprise people, but most of my younger patients are very polite about using their cell phones in the chair,” she said. “The kids never answer their phone while getting treatment.”

Even dentists who don’t have a stated policy against texting say it can still interfere with communication between dentist and patient.

Niles, Ill., dentist Dr. Alice Boghosian said that there is a time and place for most things, but texting or talking in the dental chair is a breach of etiquette.

“One young patient of mine had to interrupt me when his phone was buzzing in his pocket,” Dr. Boghosian said. She was also surprised when a member of the clergy kept answering his phone even though he admitted the calls were not urgent.

As Professors Dick Greulich and Lucien Bavetta, mentor me during my post-doctoral training. Thereafter, hundreds of students, residents, graduates and postdocs profoundly influenced my journey in research.

From my perspective, living was learning and the journey has been a glorious experience, and still continues.

How do you feel about the state of dentistry as it is practiced today? American dentistry at its best is remarkable. All over America, I have met and seen amazing oral health care being provided to all types of people.

There is a debate going on today in Washington about health care reform. If you could write the legislation yourself and get it enacted, what would it include for dental care?