The first dental school was opened on February 21st, 1828 in Bainbridge, Ohio. For various reasons, our dental education has become separate from the general medical studies, even though it is still a medical specialty. Whether some people agree with it or not, the oral cavity cannot be treated without extended knowledge of the whole body physiology and pathology. This is why, during our studies we take most of the subjects that are related to other parts of the human body, from Anatomy to Cardiology, Neurology, Endocrinology and so on. But, even so, how many of us haven’t at least once heard a joke that implies our medical education is incomplete?

"Why did you choose dental school? Because I couldn’t get into medical school!” – is a classic “joke” that is made about us.

Speaking for myself, as Alexa, I always wanted to be a dentist ever since I was a child, and I am sure there are many of my colleagues from around the world who can say the same. For some reason, this is a bit hard to understand for some of our colleagues in medical school. They should not be generalized though since most of them understand the importance of treating the oral cavity in cooperation with other medical specialties.

Ruxandra, a 4th year medical student in Bucharest, Romania, told us that in her surroundings we are considered just like medical students, the main difference from them being that we need to do way more practice than them, especially from early years.

Franci, a 5th year medical student in Ankara, Turkey had quite an expressive opinion when asked if a dentist could be considered a doctor. In his words, “Medicine is potentially the largest field in academics. Only the number of divisions, specialties and subspecialties is enough to understand how broad it is, without even considering the amount of time and training required to become a specialist in any of the fields. I believe the department of dentistry is a branch of medicine which is broad, complicated and specialized enough to be separated by academicians as its own faculty. Dentists are essentially doctors studying one of the most difficult specialties. There is a clinical part to it, there is a surgical part to it, there is a diagnostic part to it and there is a public health component in dentistry. Which one of these makes dentistry unqualified to be called medicine, or dentists unqualified to be called real doctors? None of it. The main reason why medical students believe dentistry is not medicine (not the only one, flash news: med students are full of themselves) is that dentists go through a fast lane to become specialists. They don’t go through the long years of medical training before they start studying their specialty, stomatology. This makes the average med student feel cheated on, because they have to study countless books of pointless information in order to earn the right to study their specialty. Why does a dermatologist need to learn about pancreas cancer? Why does an ophthalmologist need to know contraindications to a colonoscopy? Or a brain surgeon about the ankle ligaments? The average med student will accept all these specialists as doctors because they went through all these years of memorization torture in order to get to their specialty.

But I don’t believe suffering makes you a doctor. Your abilities and your knowledge do. And a dentist who is knowledgeable and specialized enough to perform their MEDICAL profession, is without a doubt a doctor.”

While it could be argued that being past the three first years of medical school, now more into the clinical part of it, Franci and Ruxandra have a better grasp of the concept and can approach the subject with more hindsight, we bring in the comment of another medical student on the subject.
Sara is a 3rd year medical student in Ankara, Turkey with these thoughts on the topic: “With the passing of the years medicine has passed from dealing with the disease to dealing with the patient who has the disease. By this modern and much-needed approach doctors came to the conclusion that indeed medicine could not do only by its own and to treat the patient we needed to have a more interdisciplinary understanding of the patient as a whole. To better treat diseases like diabetes or hypertension, apart from medicine, we need a regulation of the diet, therefore the assistance of a dietician; obesity needs physical rehabilitation more than anything else, etc. Dentistry on the other hand is a branch of medicine even though since created has been seen as a different profession. That artificial division is bad for the public’s health. It’s time to bring the mouth back into the body. Today, dentists use sophisticated methods for prevention, diagnosis and treatment. They implant teeth, pinpoint oral cancers, use 3D imaging to reshape a jaw, and can treat some dental decay medically, without a drill. There are many cases where teeth infections being hidden would cause the patient symptoms unrelated to the cause, proving that there is an intimate connection between oral health and overall health. Dental infection can lead to the potentially serious blood infection known as sepsis. Despite having applied to the hospital, the patient must also be seen by a dentist. Nowadays jaw malformations are common. In these cases, an orthodontist is needed to assist the surgery room as much as the maxillofacial surgeon. As I stated in the beginning to be able to give our patients a better health, we as doctors must cooperate and accept that “the mouth is part of our body” and as such it must be treated.”

Yet, even though the majority, if not all, of them understand this, there seems to be a “trend” for some to make comments regarding our education.

It appears to have spread worldwide, from Malaysia to Romania and all the way to the United States, as medical students seem to have caught up with this “trend”. Ben is a dental student in New York, USA. Some of the comments he heard during his studies are “If I fail anatomy, I guess I’ll just become a dental student” or “Oh you don’t need to wear your white coat – you’re just a dentist”. Such comments don’t only make us feel bad at some moments, but they even start conflicts between us and our colleagues. Conflicts like these should be avoided, because even with our differences, we will all need to work together in the future. We will not be able to conduct some procedures without communicating with doctors, and we need to understand their work as much as they need to understand ours.

To conclude, we could say that it is unprofessional for med students to look down at our profession by sheer comparison of the academic curriculum. It is not about which one is more important, or which one is more knowledgeable anymore. Both doctors’ and dentists’ main concern should be how each can get better at their own profession and achieve a comprehensive diagnosis and treatment through keeping good contact with each other. As dentists, we have general medical knowledge, yet we know the red line we shouldn’t cross. What we expect from doctors is that they don’t refuse to acquire general dental knowledge and that they also know the line where we should step in. We are both two highly knowledgeable professions standing on opposite sides of a river and the best and only way to help our patients is that we meet at the middle of the bridge.

Medical & Dental Students

Civil War or Infinity War?

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Sili Domnor / Turkey
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37 MAGAZINE