An Editorial

To Fill a Void

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I believe that everyone familiar with the recent history of prosthetics and orthotics will agree that the results of the research program in artificial limbs initiated in 1945 by the National Academy of Sciences at the instance of the Surgeon General of the Army has been very beneficial to amputees and to the prosthetists that serve them. Patients requiring orthopaedic bracing and orthotists have also benefited from this program, which has been supported from the beginning by the Veterans Administration and since about 1956 by the Department of Health, Education & Welfare. Yet for the first five years, or so, of the program, prosthetists and orthotists, not knowing how it would affect their "business," were quite wary of the government-supported research and development teams, and it was not an easy matter to induce practicing private prosthetists to attend the first series of formal education programs offered by the government at UCLA in 1953, even when their attendance was heavily subsidized.

Today, the prosthetics and orthotics education programs are considered by all to be essential to maintenance of a healthy prosthetics and orthotics service, and students pay substantial tuitions to obtain an education in this field. In recent years the AAOP has come forth with continuing education programs that are being improved steadily, and I am sure the younger practitioners probably find it difficult to imagine a world without formal education programs in prosthetics and orthotics.

Although the original purpose of the educational programs was to introduce to practitioners as soon as possible the results of research, the government agencies, for reasons known only to the bureaucrats involved, have in recent years essentially abandoned support of research in prosthetics and orthotics. A review of the latest issue of the Bulletin of Prosthetics Research (BPR #10-32) which contains progress reports on all of the research and development efforts in prosthetics and orthotics supported by the VA and DHEW indicates that less than a quarter of the projects devoted to "Rehabilitation Engineering" relate to prosthetics and orthotics. The percentage in terms of fiscal support is probably even less. This circumstance is reflected also in the source of manuscripts submitted to "Orthotics and Prosthetics." In the past, most of the articles were submitted by workers involved in government-supported research programs. Today, the majority of articles are being received from private practitioners.

Perhaps this is as it should be, even though medical research is heavily subsidized, and maybe the prosthetics and orthotics profession has grown to the point where it can assume the leadership in the research, development, evaluation, and education needed if it is to continue to provide the increasingly better services expected of professional groups.

In addition to the role of the AAOP in providing opportunities for continuing education, an encouraging signal seems to be coming recently through many of the manuscripts submitted to "O & P" in which practicing prosthetists and orthotists describe their own innovations. However, almost without exception, the authors include only their own experiences with patients, and it never fails to occur to me, as editor, what a pity it is that there exists no group to which these excellent ideas can be submitted for a non-biased evaluation conducted under typical clinical conditions, and thus, be channelled with confidence into the formal educational programs.

Even if the federal bureaucrats feel that research and development in prosthetics and orthotics is not important or glamorous enough for support, perhaps AAOP could persuade them that it would be in the public interest to support, at least partially, a clinical evaluation program to be conducted by the Academy. I am confident that Academy members will gladly cooperate by fitting patients on a controlled, experimental basis, and, thus, the government will need to support only staff, travel expenses, and in some instances the cost of materials and devices in connection with this much needed function.

If such a project is proposed, I recommend strongly that the universities and colleges offering educational programs in prosthetics and orthotics be given the opportunity to participate, for, in that way, any recommendation that a device or technique be added to their respective programs will come as no surprise, and therefore be accepted more readily.

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