The Founding of the University of Alberta School of Dentistry, Canada

G.H. Sperber

Abstract: This paper describes the formation of a dental school in Edmonton in 1917 and its development over a hundred years.

A Province - Alberta

The Province of Alberta was named after Queen Victoria’s daughter, Her Royal Highness the Princess Louise Caroline Alberta, during Queen Victoria’s reign at the time of the founding of the province in 1909.

A University and Dental School

The founding of a Dental School at the University of Alberta in the Capital City of Edmonton ostensibly occurred in 1917, just nine years after the establishment of the University. The Dental School’s origin was the consequence of the University President, Henry Marshal Tory’s desire to identify the newly established Province as an outpost of higher education in Western Canada, more than a thousand kilometers from established Schools in Eastern Canada. President Tory needed to have a dental educator to fulfil his desire to establish a dental school within the already established Faculty of Medicine. He invited his personal dentist, Dr. Harry Ernest Bulyea, a Harvard University graduate, to consider establishing a dental education programme at the university (Fig 1). Dr. Bulyea at first demurred, but agreed to take on the task with another local dentist.

The first dental students

While the first seven students were admitted to the Dental Programme in 1917, they never proceeded initially to pursue further dental education because of the World War taking place in Europe at that time. Once Dr. Bulyea agreed to begin the dental course, the first students were to undertake the first two years of the four-year programme by attending basic science courses in anatomy, physiology, biochemistry and bacteriology at either the University of Toronto or McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, under the auspices of the University of Alberta. The students were then to return to Alberta to complete the final two years with clinical instruction from Dr. Bulyea. It was not until 1923 that the University of Alberta offered a full four-year DDS dental degree, with seven students graduating.

The dental programme continued as a Faculty of Medicine component until 1944, when the Faculty of Dentistry achieved its independence from Medicine, with the appointment of the first Dean of Dentistry, Dr. Scott Hamilton. The School’s intake of students was raised to fifty candidates, that continued until 1990, when the admittance to Dentistry was cut to forty students that continues today.

School of Dental Hygiene

The establishment of a School of Dental Hygiene in 1961 was another initiative undertaken by the second dean, Dr. Hector MacLean, under the
Direction of Ms. Margaret Berry. The programme initially offered a two-year diploma in Dental Hygiene to at first twenty students. The programme was later extended to a four-year BSc. Dental Hygiene Degree in 2020.

Specialty Training and continuing education

The establishment of specialty training was initiated with a two-year Orthodontics programme by Dr. Bus Haryett in 1964 that continues today. Further specialty programmes have been established in Pedodontics, Periodontics and Dental Pathology, expanding the post-graduate training opportunities.

The requirement for dentists in Alberta to complete continuing education credits to maintain their practicing licenses has led to a large Division of Continuing Dental Education component of the Dental School. It offers courses in all the specialties of dentistry, expanding into cosmetic dentistry with facial rejuvenation with botulin therapy.

Medical and Dental Faculties Unite

The separate identification of the Faculty of Dentistry from the Faculty of Medicine came to an end in 1999, when the then President of the University, Dr. Paul Davenport advocated the closure of the Faculty of Dentistry as a cost-cutting measure. The proposal met with vigorous opposition by the dental profession, and the issue was resolved by the Dean of Medicine, Dr. Lorne Tyrrell offering to incorporate Dentistry into a newly-formed Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry which now pertains1.

A Dental Museum featuring the history of dentistry is a component of the School of Dentistry that plans to move into a new facility in 20222. The old and new buildings and the museum are shown (Figs 2,3,4).

In 2017 the School of Dentistry celebrated the centenary of its founding in 1917 with a planned innovation of the dental curriculum to incorporate medical issues in dental practice. The new curriculum is an ongoing programme over the next three years, with completion in 2022.

References


Author Biography: G.H. Sperber, Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry, University of Alberta. Professor Emeritus Geoffrey Sperber is a BDS and PhD graduate of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. He graduated from the University of Rochester, USA with a MSc before he joined the Faculty of Dentistry, University of Alberta in 1961 to initiate the Dental Hygiene Programme. He currently continues as a Faculty member in the 59th year of his appointment.

Address for correspondence: gsperber@ualberta.ca