

EDITORIAL

WHAT IS OUR PROFESSION?

Conventionally, a profession has been defined in terms of provision of a given service that is based upon a defined and systematic body of knowledge. The possession of such knowledge affords a degree of status and authority to professionals. In return for the benefits of professional membership, members are expected to exercise informed judgement, perform relevant tasks at technologically high levels of skill, act ethically and maintain confidentiality. In other words, in dealing with a professional, there are the dual expectations of specific knowledge and of trust.

However, what this definition does not acknowledge is the flexibility inherent within each profession. In the words of Slaughter and Leslie¹, professions are neither static nor fixed, but are always in the process of being reconstructed. This raises the question; how specialised or technical must a body of knowledge be if a group of practitioners is to maintain its professional status? When maxillo-facial surgeons or endodontists, for example, sought professional status, other professions opposed this on the basis that their knowledge was not sufficiently unique or not sufficiently grounded in research. So how do we pinpoint the profession of Forensic Odontology? Can we define our own systematic, scientific body of knowledge? Do we have to? Or should we regard knowledge as flexible and ever changing rather than absolute?

A parallel challenge is the increased emphasis on competence-based professional practice. How does this affect what we consider the professional boundaries of forensic odontology? Are we equally competent to handle bitemarks and human identification? And what of dental ageing or bony evidence of trauma to the craniofacial region? In addition to a call for more fluid conceptions of what we are competent to do, there is a call for more inclusiveness – how do we accommodate Dental Therapists and Dental Technologists? And forensic anthropologists, how do they fit into our profession?

Rather than accepting at face value the boundaries of our profession, I think we need to examine our future. Recently, Dirkmaat and his colleagues² reminded us that costs and time were the only constraints to identification based solely on DNA. It is simply not a question of how these considerations will be overcome, but a question of when. If this happens, they warned, forensic odontology may become mostly superfluous. The way out, I suggest, is to broaden our body of knowledge and with it our scope of practice from simple dental identification to a larger range of activities, including trauma analysis, child abuse, dental ageing, taphonomy and forensic archaeology. So, though the challenges seem to be huge, the scope for future developments within our profession, seem exhilarating.

REFERENCES

1. Slaughter S, Leslie L. Academic Capitalism. Baltimore; Johns Hopkins. 1997.
2. Dirkmaat DC, Cabo LL, Ousley SD, Symes SA. New Perspectives in forensic anthropology. Yearbk Phys Anthropol 2008;51:33-53.

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