Offering a “0.1-Percent Solution”

As the need for quality orthotic and prosthetic treatment grows, so too must our ABC-certified practitioner base.

A profession must adequately meet the needs of the population it serves if it is to remain healthy. We may not like to think of the collection of needs and demands for O&P services as a “market,” but it is essential that we and our leadership face that reality.

Many variables, such as quality, distribution, efficiency and advertising, have an impact on our market, but the basic supply-versus-demand phenomenon is paramount. I believe our profession has focused far too much on building and protecting an elite professional corps while giving too little attention to the explosion of demand.

The O&P Evolution
The birth of Medicare in the 1960s sharply accelerated the demand for healthcare in the United States. Medical schools expanded their programs, and the overall number of medical schools also increased. (Minnesota had one medical school before Medicare, and by 1973 that number tripled.)

The medical profession also recognized the need for other levels of primary medical care to meet the growing demand. Education and credentialing programs were developed to prepare nurse practitioners and physician assistants to deliver primary care. According to the July 8 Minneapolis Star Tribune, “In the last two years, the number of schools offering physician assistant (PA) programs leaped 33 percent....In the last 10 years, the annual number of graduates from PA programs has nearly doubled....” We are reminded almost daily that the aging of the U.S. population soon will further accelerate the demand for healthcare.

O&P education and credentialing programs also have grown but at a much slower pace: about 25-percent growth over the past 10 years (meaning the number of programs has doubled in the past 20 years).

That rate of increase falls far short of meeting the growth of demand for O&P services since the late ’60s. A free market system abhors a vacuum as much as nature. The O&P service provider shortage is a free market vacuum drawing in other (non-ABC-certified) individuals and organizations.

The orthotics and prosthetics profession needs to recognize and define several levels of O&P service need/care (as nurses and other medical professionals have). We must deliberately guide and foster education and credentialing programs matched to those multiple levels of service. Failing to do so is equivalent to turning our backs on the realities of the public’s needs and the healthcare marketplace.

Recognizing the Need
Some of the Academy and ABC leadership have recognized the need to embrace and promote more than a single level of O&P care and credential; however, they have met opposition to those efforts. One of the purposes of this article is to encourage my colleagues to take another look at the volume and spectrum of public need. If we are to continue to be the main voice for O&P practitioners, we must welcome, promote and help educate those individuals who are and will continue to provide other levels of O&P care. It’s time to get our noses out of the clouds so we can see where we’re going and be leaders to the whole profession.

“Well,” you may say, “we are educating more practitioners these days, and that’s bound to help.” I’m sorry to report the bad news: The O&P practitioner shortage is going from bad to worse unless we do something really dramatic.

In November of last year NCOPE published an informative report titled “Issues Affecting the Future Demand for Orthotists and Prosthetists.” The report, which was researched, compiled and writ-

J. Martin Carlson, CPO, is chairman of the Academy’s Subcommittee on Terminology and Practice Standards and is president of Tamarack Habilitation Technologies Inc. in St. Paul, Minn.
ten by Caroline C. Nielsen, PhD, a healthcare industry expert, makes use of current hard data and trends to project future changes in the supply and demand for O&P practitioners.

The section pertaining to projected demand concludes with the statement, “Additional educational programs need to be planned now to provide the necessary numbers of certified practitioners for effective individualized care in the future.” Nielsen’s statement would be even stronger if it included the already existing inadequacy of our practitioner numbers. Nielsen’s conclusions are well-supported by the data.

Consider that 760 (25 percent) of our O&P practitioners are 60 years of age or older. If we assume a few of the late retirements will be matched by early retirements, we will lose about 750 practitioners during the next five years. A very optimistic projection would indicate the present course will add about 900 new ABC-certified orthotists and prosthetists to the field in the five years from 1997 through 2001. That will represent a net gain of only about 150 practitioners over the next five years if we do not make radical changes in our education and credentialing programs. That limited number represents a further erosion of our supply-versus-demand position. Remember the vacuum?

Meeting Our Patients’ Needs
Some of our colleagues are energized by the very idea that they are members of a small and exclusive professional group. Some have worked to create ever-higher standards and requirements, furthering their self-righteous professional credo without being responsive to the full volume and spectrum of public needs and demands. We need, as a profession and as an industry, to give a whole lot more attention and funding toward better, larger and more O&P educational programs.

It may be useful to draw an example from a nation where the O&P profession is thriving and healthy. Germany’s O&P profession and industry have been strong and prosperous. There are many reasons for this, including that country’s attitude toward O&P education. The German O&P industry has recognized it depends and relies on a healthy O&P education system. The O&P school programs receive a significant portion of their funding from the industry they serve. The foremost O&P education institution in Germany, the Orthopedic Technology Meister School in Dortmund, was founded by the German trade association. It is a private institution, with the majority of its operational funding coming from voluntary, self-imposed assessments by all (professional, supplier and service provider) sectors of the German O&P industry.

O&P education is extraordinarily expensive because a proper program, in addition to standard classrooms, requires an enormous amount of lab space and equipment to enable students to work directly with amputee patients. Asking a state university to support a program that will supply the needs of 10 percent of the nation is simply not fair; such an approach is bound to encounter problems. We as a profession and industry have not been able to convince our federal government to support such programs. The alternative is that we must organize and accept a significant role in raising education funds. We need to do that now!

I hope to initiate some action in this direction by proposing a “0.1-percent solution.” To put Tamarack’s money where my mouth is, I pledge we will contribute 0.1 percent of our total sales next year to the O&P Education Program at Century College (a state community college in White Bear Lake, Minn.). In addition, I pledge to contribute 0.1 percent of my gross annual earnings in the same direction. We hope others will decide right now to do the same for the O&P education program closest to them and that in the near future our national organizations will set up some sort of program to encourage, coordinate, track, and recognize those businesses and individuals who participate in the “0.1-percent solution.”

ARE YOU UP TO THE CHALLENGE?
If you would like to accept the “0.1-percent solution” challenge by pledging 0.1 percent of your individual or company earnings to a local educational institution, let us know!

Contact the O&P Almanac with your name, company and the educational institution to which you plan to contribute by writing to the Editor, O&P Almanac, 1650 King St., Suite 500, Alexandria, VA 22314; fax (703) 836-0838.

The O&P Almanac will publish a list of all such educational contributions in an upcoming issue.