

MANPOWER SURVEY 1991

PRELIMINARY REPORT

The following is a preliminary report from the Orthodontic Services Committee of the A.S.O. based on the results of the Manpower Survey carried out in 1992 which referred to the manpower situation as it applied at census time, August 1991. Insufficient responses were obtained for this survey to provide a complete picture of the present manpower situation; however, changes of a general nature are clear. This is a call for more responses in order to obtain a clearer picture of the regional distribution of orthodontic services.

Members of the Australian Society of Orthodontists must now be aware of the factors affecting the viability of private specialist orthodontic practice. These factors include the increasing numbers of specialists entering practice in relation to population growth; and the dilution of the specialist field by general practitioner incursions and the national economic situation. As previous surveys predicted¹, there are now signs indicating that, nationally, we are in a situation of an over-supply of manpower: that is, some new graduates are unable to find work. On the other hand, there are a few private practice opportunities in country centres; and, owing to the current economic recession, more demand is falling on public-sector practice, in both the city and country.

The questions in the 1991/92 survey to do with the number of case starts, will help provide data which may be compared with that of previous surveys; and, if sufficient responses are obtained, enable the Society to address some of the above issues, thus putting it in the position of being able to advise "whether and where" private practice is viable. (The survey was careful to maintain the anonymity of its data by listing locations by their postcodes; however, this has presented the Committee with a problem: some members who requested market area surveys did not identify themselves and this is necessary in order to forward their analyses to them.)

Previous surveys² have established that one orthodontist is able to service a population of 40,000. This ratio has been of great help to members in assessing the demand-supply ratio for a particular region. The economic factors mentioned above may have altered that ratio; the survey will determine if that is so; and by how much.

Seventy-six replies have been received; this is 17% of the total; and compared to the percentage of responses to other surveys, is significant. However, some of the younger members of the A.S.O. have indicated that they did not receive the survey form; we urge them, in their own interest and the interest of their colleagues, to obtain one from the Science Centre (address below) and return it as soon as possible.

The returns in hand indicate that there has been a continuing reduction in the number of case starts during the survey period; the average being 169 for 1989;

160 for 1990; and 138 in 1991. This is a drop of 5.3% and 14% respectively; and 18.3% over the three-year period.

As in previous surveys^{1,2}, the 12-year-old population figures are an indication of the need for orthodontic treatment because this age group is near the middle of the orthodontic population. Data from the 1991 Australian Census indicates that the Australian 12-year-old population in 1991 was 247,036. The total number of A.S.O. members and associates at that time was 450; making a 12-year-old population: orthodontic ratio of 548. In 1976 the ratio was 1723.

The largest age group of patients currently undergoing treatment has not yet been surveyed; but it is possible that this figure has changed; there is anecdotal evidence that more adult patients are now seeking treatment than in 1976, when the last national survey was conducted.

The Federal Government has taken an active interest in the national over-supply of medical practitioners and the inequity of their geographic distribution. The same has not been true for dental practitioners; which is why this survey is important – we must do our own monitoring! Superficial observations – which are not based on any current official figures, and are observations only – show that most rural areas appear to be well supplied with private orthodontic services as many orthodontists travel to branch practices to fill their productive time; on the other hand, many recent graduates are under-employed and one employment agency has stated that twenty-five orthodontists in Australia responded to its questionnaire.

The Orthodontic Services Committee encourages members who have not completed the survey and who wish to participate in it, to contact the Science Centre; request the form; answer the questions; and return it as soon as possible.

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References

- ¹ Gottlieb EL. Orthodontic economic indicators. *J Clin Orthod* 1976; 10: 256-266.
- ² O'Connor KB, Lee BW. The location of orthodontic practice in Australia. *Aust Orth J* 1979-80; 6: 11-19.