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# How the Insightful Leadership of James English Transformed a Traditional Dental School into a Leading Educational Institution

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During the 1960s, the dental school at the University of Buffalo underwent a profound change, as a result of its merger with the State University of New York (SUNY), and, very importantly, because of the outstanding leadership provided by Dean James A. English. This article contrasts what the school was like in 1960 before Dean English's arrival, and what it had become in 1970 when his deanship ended. It also recounts the leadership qualities of Dean English and the measures he took to transform the dental school into a leading educational institution. During his tenure, the school experienced profound change, including integration of medicine with dentistry in the curriculum; "internationalization" of dental education and research; organization of the first Oral Biology Department and PhD graduate program in a dental school in the United States; insistence on "knowledge-driven" dental practice—a concept we now term "evidenced-based dentistry"; the establishment of novel approaches to dental education including the "diagonal" curriculum; incorporation of prevention in practice; elective courses for dental students; and comprehensive clinical care. All of these accomplishments were novel for the day and greatly influenced incorporation of similar innovations in many schools around the world.

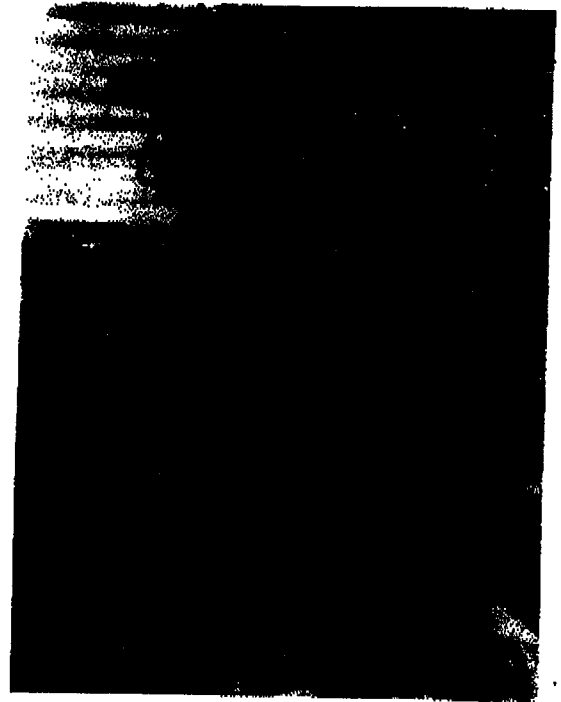
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## Introduction

James Andrew English (*Fig. 1*) was "The Right Man, for the Right Job, at the Right Time." He was Dean of the University of Buffalo (UB) School of Dentistry from 1960 to 1970, during which time profound changes took place in dental education, patient care and research. Dean "Jim" English, who passed away on October 21, 2004 at the age of 94, left a legacy that deserves to be remembered and honored. The changes that took place during that period were a direct result of Dean English's wisdom, farsightedness, leadership and energy. While Dean at Buffalo, Jim English brought about several important changes in the school and in dental education:

- Converting a provincial, clinically-oriented school into an internationally recognized research-oriented school of dental medicine.
- Encouraging the integration of medicine with dentistry in the curriculum.
- Promoting the "internationalization" of dental education and research.
- Providing significant resources to organize the first Oral Biology Department and PhD graduate program in a dental school in the United States.
- Encouraging "knowledge-driven" dental practice—a concept now termed "evidenced-based dentistry."
- Establishing novel approaches to dental education including the "diagonal" curriculum, prevention in practice, elective courses for fourth-year dental students and the comprehensive clinical care of patients.

This article will recount that history, remind dental educators and the dental community of Dean English's role in these changes, and, in that way, honor his memory and inspire others to move the discipline forward.



*Fig. 1.* Dean James English

## Early Life and Military Career

Jim English was born in Harrison Valley, Pa. in 1904, was a 1936 graduate (with first honors) of the University of Pennsylvania School of Dentistry, and a veteran of World War II. He spent 24 years (1936-60) as a dental officer in the US Navy, retiring with the rank of Captain. While in the Navy, he earned an MS degree in Pathology and a PhD degree in Biochemistry, and was awarded a commendation from the Surgeon General of the Navy for outstanding performance of duty. Among his many assignments, he served as Science Liaison Officer, Office of Naval Research in London, England.<sup>1</sup> While on duty in London he presented many papers and lectures and was admitted as a member to the Royal Society of Medicine, London.

Jim English was an accomplished and productive scientist, having published numerous articles in respected journals such as *Science* and the *Journal of Dental Research*. His scientific stature was such that he was elected to the board of directors of the International Association for Dental

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Research (IADR), serving as President from 1961-62. Among the other organizations and societies of which he was a member were the American College of Dentists, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Association of Military Surgeons, American Academy of Oral Pathology, American Dental Association, and Omicron Kappa Upsilon. Prior to his retirement, Captain English was Head of the Medicine and Dentistry Branch, Office of Naval Research, with additional duty as Head of the Dental Research Branch, Dental Division, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. These extensive and diverse experiences allowed him to develop numerous relationships with dental educators, investigators and policy makers around the world. Thus, by 1960, when he was appointed Dean in Buffalo, he possessed a wealth of knowledge and experience in patient care, public health, clinical and basic research, and administration, both in the United States and in many other countries.

### **Deanship at Buffalo**

In 1960, the University of Buffalo (UB) was a small private university, struggling for existence. While it had a strong local following with a large number of its students commuting from their homes in western New York, things were about to change. Nelson Rockefeller had been elected governor of New York in 1959 and was in the process of expanding and upgrading the State University of New York (SUNY) system. In addition, Clifford C. Furnas, an author, Olympic athlete, scientist, former Director of the airplane division of Curtiss Wright during World War II, and a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, had become Chancellor of UB in 1954. He guided the University through the difficult political and technical tasks of merging UB with SUNY. In 1962, Dr. Furnas became the first President of SUNY at Buffalo, fully supporting Dr. English's agenda and making it possible for him to accomplish so much during his deanship.

In 1960, the clinical faculty of the UB Dental School consisted of a group of very dedicated men—and one woman—who had kept the school going during very difficult times, including the Great

Depression and World War II, when a consolidated year-round curriculum of three years was instituted. The clinical faculty had also raised funds to build new dental clinics and classrooms on the Main Street campus after the school moved there in 1953. Although the faculty received a meager salary for teaching, their dedication to the well-being of the dental school was visible and tangible. Despite these very admirable qualities and activities, all members of the clinical faculty were UB Dental School graduates, part-time teachers, and made their living by conducting private dental practices in the local community. Furthermore, very few had formal residency or graduate training in the discipline they were teaching. They used the information gained in their practices and were strongly influenced by their immediate colleagues. Thus, as time went on, their teaching did not keep up with the advances being made in their fields. In some courses, the faculty member would merely read his notes or read from a book while the students wrote down the words.

By the standards of the day, the school provided good dental care for its patients. However, if a potential patient had a medical or systemic condition, they were considered a "non-teaching case" and were not accepted as patients. Thus, application of the excellent basic science knowledge imparted to the dental students in the medical school, was rarely, if ever, used or reinforced in the clinical years. Furthermore, there were no research programs in any of the dental departments at the as all research activity was conducted in the basic science departments of the School of Medicine. This was the clinical and academic environment in the dental school when Jim English arrived as Dean in 1960.

As his one of first priorities, Dean English set out to recruit full-time clinical and research dental faculty.<sup>3-4</sup> This included the traditional disciplines of operative and prosthetic dentistry, as well as Periodontics, Endodontics, Pediatric Dentistry, Oral Surgery, Orthodontics, Oral Pathology, and Dental Materials. He also recruited full-time faculty in the expanding areas of Oral Diagnosis and Oral Medicine.

Due to the breadth of his experience and contacts, Dean English was able to recruit some faculty from the retirement ranks of the U.S. Navy, the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, other U.S. dental schools, and a few dentists from the local community. Moreover, Dean English was convinced of the need for global cooperation in dental education and research;<sup>5</sup> therefore he made sure that accomplished full-time faculty were also recruited from countries such as Denmark, England, Japan and Norway. In several cases, Dean English encouraged young part-time clinical faculty to obtain extra training and make academic dentistry a full-time career. He would often help that person fund their training by finding them work as co-investigators in ongoing clinical studies and, in so doing, helped to establish a cadre of well-trained clinical researchers. Collectively, these efforts resulted in the recruitment of 60 full-time faculty who were educationally and culturally diverse, in contrast to what had previously existed. Dean English's leadership was able to forge this diverse group into a cohesive faculty with excellent *esprit de corps*. The high morale and motivation was greatly enhanced by Jim English's "going to bat" for the faculty. For example, in the 1960s, the University at Buffalo was in the early stages of becoming a major research university and its promotions policies began to reflect this reality. As a result, academic advancement for dental faculty became a problem until Dean English was able to explain to the President that the dental faculty needed time to achieve the expected academic progress.<sup>6</sup> One of the most creative and far-reaching things that Dean English did was to establish a Department of Oral Biology, the first in the United States. He gave himself the academic title "Professor of Oral Biology" and recruited a top scientist from Columbia University to chair the department. Oral Biology went on to recruit a group of very competent researchers, both dentists and non-dentists, and, in 1963, developed the first PhD Program in Oral Biology in the US. That program became extremely successful and produced many top scientists in the US and around the world. The Department of Oral Biology

also became very successful in obtaining external funding for research and research training. During one year alone, Oral Biology's level of external funding was higher than any other department in the entire SUNY system. The department went on to achieve national and international recognition. Its graduate program recently celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and continues to educate interested students in state of the art research methods applied to problems important to oral and systemic health. It is clear that Dean English foresaw the need to build a respectable research effort within the dental school that equaled that of other schools in the university.

Dr. English also considered the basic sciences departments of the Medical School as departments of the Dental School and acted accordingly. The Chairs of those departments, or their designees, were invited to be full voting members of the Executive Committee of the Dental School, a move that greatly enhanced communication between the clinical and basic science departments.

Dean English's emphasis on basic understanding, research and the development of new knowledge began to permeate the school. He urged all faculty members to be inquisitive, think creatively and understand the principles or phenomena underlying all clinical methods or techniques. One of his favorite expressions was, "you should read the label before opening the can." He encouraged "knowledge-driven" dental practice—a concept now termed "evidence-based dentistry." He would often take the time to walk through the clinics and speak with faculty, staff and students. If he encountered faculty members chatting or just standing around, he would gently suggest that they "read something useful instead." After appointing someone as a department chair, Dean English would ask, "What are you going to do now?" If the reply was, "I'm going to be a department chair," Dean English would respond by saying, "That's your title, but what are you going to *do*?" He also asked any of the new department chairs having specialty education in their field to take Board Exams and become Board Certified (a Diplomate) in that field.

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During his tenure, the dental school expanded the number of clinical post-graduate programs and initiated its first research-oriented MS graduate program (in Orthodontics). Dean English also placed a great emphasis on prevention and urged each department to apply this to its patient care and teaching. Associated with this was the formation of a Department of Behavioral Sciences that was expected to initiate studies in the human dynamics of motivation and preventive activity. Soon after stepping down as dean in 1970, his commitment to prevention led him to establish a formal didactic and clinical program preventive dentistry in which first- and second-year dental students provided basic, hands-on preventive care to patients.

Dean English was credited with initiating an "Honor System" and a student-administered honor court to address any honor system violations.<sup>7,8</sup> This system, in addition to its attempt to curtail unprofessional behavior by very competitive dental students, was intended to reinforce their ethical behavior as they cared for patients after graduation. Collectively, these actions reflected Dean English's value system, which he constantly reinforced throughout the school.

Dean English was always open to suggestions from young faculty who, he recognized, represented the future of the school. Student class officers were invited to serve on school committees. He also made a point, sometimes publicly, of discouraging the expression of ethnic stereotypes. There was a tangible movement to recruit women as dental students and faculty. Most importantly, he took the first steps to identify and recruit dental students from minority and disadvantaged groups.

By the time Dr. English stepped down from his position as dean in 1970, major curriculum changes were underway. The existing curriculum where only medical school basic sciences courses were taught during the first year and none were taught after the second year was changed to the so-called "diagonal curriculum," in which dental courses, such as Dental Anatomy, Occlusion and Dental Materials were moved to the first year, and the medical school's course in Pharmacology was

moved to the third year. A Senior Elective Program was also introduced, and, by 1969-70, the first Comprehensive Care Clinic had been initiated for the second semester of the senior year.<sup>9,10</sup> Within a year, the Comprehensive Care Clinic was expanded to the entire senior year and, eventually, the entire third year of the curriculum. These changes in the environment in which patient care took place and students learned were much more than mere scheduling adjustments. Comprehensive Care was a more realistic model of general dental practice, providing greater efficiency resulting in fewer patient visits. It greatly enhanced the immediate solving of inter-disciplinary problems and, as a result, faculty from different disciplines learned from each other. Comprehensive Care also provided the framework upon which all patents could be accepted, regardless of their medical condition. This became extremely important as the patient population aged and more systemic diseases and orofacial problems had to be diagnosed and managed. Many other dental schools soon adopted the Comprehensive Care Model for clinical education.

### **The Result of Jim English's Efforts**

By the time Jim English left the deanship in 1970, the school had built a full-time clinical and research faculty; developed a genuine partnership with the medical school's basic science departments and other health sciences departments and programs; revised the dental curriculum; developed new pre-doctoral, post-doctoral and graduate programs; opened opportunities to all qualified individuals irrespective of nationality, gender, race or ethnicity; and built an infrastructure for research and enhanced the opportunities to gain external research funding. As a result, the school earned a very positive national and international reputation. Finally, and very importantly, the dental school gained recognition as a valuable and respected academic component of the parent university and of the State University of New York system. This recognition is significant since, at the time, many regarded dentistry and dental education only as a narrow technical field.

In summary, James English's insightful leadership transformed The University of Buffalo Dental School into a leading educational institution, and he was undoubtedly "The Right Man, for the Right Job, at the Right Time." He was also a friend, mentor and role model... and he is missed.

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