Oregon Health and Science University School of Dentistry

There is only one school of dentistry in Oregon. It was founded in Portland on December 20, 1898, when the privately owned Oregon College of Dentistry was incorporated, with Herbert C. Miller as the first dean. A few months later, on March 9, 1899, Norris Cox incorporated the Tacoma College of Dental Surgery. The two schools merged in 1900 to form the North Pacific Dental College at Northwest Fifteenth Avenue and Couch. Herbert C. Miller was named dean the next year; he would hold that position for twenty-three years.

Ten students were admitted to the first-year class for a program that lasted twenty-one months and cost $345. Admission required two years of high school and a certificate of entrance into the third year. By 1911, the college had expanded to include a school of pharmacy, and it moved to a new building at Northeast Sixth Avenue and Oregon (the pharmacy closed in 1941). The college initiated a four-year course in 1917. In 1924, Louis Fitzpatrick was named dean and the school admitted ninety students. Three years later, a rudimentary dental hygiene educational program was launched, and by 1937 students had to complete two years of pre-dental college credit in order to be admitted to the doctoral program.

In 1944, the American Dental Association withheld accreditation of the school, now known as the North Pacific College of Oregon, because of deficiencies in the facility and a lack of university affiliation. Within a year, Miller, the Oregon State Dental Association, prominent alumni, and state legislators arranged to integrate the school into the University of Oregon. The new Dental School of the University of Oregon (later the University of Oregon Dental School) was initially led by Interim Dean Ernest Starr. Harold J. Noyes was appointed dean in 1946; he oversaw the introduction of a formal dental hygiene curriculum three years later.

The school faced serious accreditation deficiencies once again in 1951. At the urging of Noyes and others, the legislature appropriated funds to construct the school’s current building on the Marquam Hill Campus; the building was completed in 1956. During this period, Noyes initiated what was known as a “vertical curriculum,” with students focusing on the biological sciences and preclinical laboratories during their first two years of study. Students saw their first patients during the first quarter of their freshman year, and clinical experience increased every year thereafter. The approach eventually became a standard adopted at other dental schools. Students also were rotated into outreach programs to treat disadvantaged, handicapped, elderly, and medically compromised individuals.

The school—and dentistry—changed when Portland engineers Norm Williams and Kenneth Austin collaborated with alumnus Kenneth Cantwell to make revolutionary improvements in an existing high-speed dental drill. In 1963, the School of Dentistry was the first in the United States to teach students to use a technology that would later become standard throughout the world.

In July 1967, with Noyes’s resignation, alumnus Louis G. Terkla became dean. The Marquam Hill facilities were consolidated in 1973 to create the University Oregon Health Sciences Center (renamed Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) in 1981). By 1975, resident admission at the OHSU School of Dentistry required three years of college study. Henry Van Hassel became dean in late 1984, and Sharon Turner was named the school’s first female dean in 1998. Alumnus Jack Clinton assumed leadership in 2003.

In addition to the doctor of dental medicine curriculum, the school has five postdoctoral specialty programs in endodontology (root canals), oral and maxillofacial surgery (face, mouth, and jaws), orthodontics (correction of abnormal teeth and jaw alignments), pediatric dentistry, and periodontology (diseases of the gums and supporting bone of the teeth). It also operates a children's dental clinic in Doernbecher Children’s Hospital and conducts dental education programs for practicing professionals.

The School of Dentistry graduated over 7,500 doctors of dental medicine (DMD) between 1899 and 2011. Some dental schools opt to award the doctor of dental surgery degree (DDS) that is equivalent to the DMD degree. The educational and training requirements are the same.

Since its founding, the OHSU School of Dentistry has continued to expand and improve its educational and research programs and remains fully accredited. In 2013, new facilities will be built along Portland's southwest waterfront, part of a collaborative Life Sciences Building that brings together OHSU, Portland State University, and Oregon State University.

Written by Louis G. Terkla

Further Reading:

Adams, W. Claude. *History of Dentistry in Oregon*. Portland, Ore.: Binfords and Mort, 1956.

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