Inside the Dental Practice: 1860-1940
Podcast Transcript

Jerry Mastey: According to Sindecuse Museum Curator, Shannon O'Dell, the exhibit showcases some of the major changes that occurred in dentistry over an 80 year period of time.

Shannon O’Dell: Inside the Dental Practice: 1860-1940 is an exhibit where visitors can see cutaway views of four different dental office areas. These different dental offices are set up with historical furnishings and equipment and tools. The chronological layout helps see immediately the differences between all four eras. There's a low graphic panel running across the front of the displays, and this provides stories about innovations, medical discoveries, and advances in dental education that spurred the changes in dental practice. And we have also another two exhibit cases that tell a story about the dentist's laboratory and the critical role of x-rays in dentistry at that time.

Jerry Mastey: What role did the University of Michigan School of Dentistry play in helping to advance the dental profession?

Shannon O’Dell: We do cover what I'd call, what we call, "Professionalism" as a broad theme area in the exhibit, and that's where we cover the issues related to dental education in the United States. The first dental school was formed in Baltimore in 1840, and it was a private college. There were a number of these colleges later on that formed and they spread throughout the eastern United States. Some of them, however, had a poor reputation as being diploma mills. The Michigan Dental Association, the practicing dentists in Michigan, would gather to meet and they became concerned about these diploma mills. And in 1865, they started lobbying the University of Michigan regents and the state of Michigan to establish a dental college. And Jonathan Taft, a well-respected Cincinnati dentist, was hired to draft the petition. And finally by 1875 the University of Michigan Regents agreed and the University became the first public university in the U.S. to offer a dental degree. And that year they also appointed Jonathan Taft to be the first dean.

Jerry Mastey: O'Dell says dentists quickly took advantage of innovations and discoveries that enabled them to help their patients, including one that is now taken for granted.

Shannon O’Dell: The role of electricity for instance changed the hours that the dentist could practice and allowed him to work longer and see more patients. That one innovation alone made a big difference. Also the dentist could afford to hire more assistants if he was able to work longer hours, because he was able to get more patients. Electricity allowed the discovery of the x-ray, which also became a very important tool to the dentist. And this obviously allowed him to diagnose previously hidden problem.
Jerry Mastey: Many items on display were gifted to the school by some of its graduates. One of the graduates was doctor Gordon Sindecuse, for whom the museum is named.

Shannon O’Dell: He was a Michigan man, and he overcame a physical disability to become the first dentist in his working-class family. Sindecuse was inspired by another U of M dentist. And he had a practice in a small town in Litchfield, MI, and this is where Sindecuse grew up. In spite of having a prosthetic leg, Sindecuse set his sights on becoming a dentists and graduated from our program in 1921 and he set up his practice in Kalamazoo. Dentistry at that time was done standing, and Sindecuse took pride in working long hours and not breaking for lunch. And after retiring in his 40s, he devoted his full attention to his investment business. And at age 90 he gave a large donation to the University of Michigan Dental School that established our museum.

Jerry Mastey: The Sindecuse Museum is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. There is not cost to tour the Museum. From the University of Michigan School of Dentistry, I'm Jerry Mastey