

## WE'VE COME A LONG WAY

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. . . *an editorial*

The BPR 10-16 Fall 1971 issue of this journal carried an article describing the new VA-Qualification Program for prosthetists to take effect on March 1, 1973. As of the present writing, 715 prosthetists have been awarded certificates as VA-Qualified Prosthetists. At present, 370 commercial facilities employ one or more VA-Qualified Prosthetists. What this program means, in effect, is that the Veterans Administration has established a positive policy of assuring that only competent prosthetists who meet certain established standards will be permitted to provide prosthetics services to veteran beneficiaries. The program could not have been launched, had it not been for the advances toward professional status made by the prosthetists in this country.

As I ponder over this latest development, I cannot help but think how far we have come in the last 20 years or so, and the steps which have led to the logical development of a program which recognizes the growing professional competence of prosthetists.

In 1951, when the writer first entered the field of prosthetics research and education, there were no formally established prosthetics schools. This is not to say that prosthetics *training* was not taking place. The Veterans Administration and industry officials had been collaborating in the conduct of many courses on the suction-socket technique; these courses, incidentally, were of a historical nature in that for the first time physicians and prosthetists were participating *together* as students. On-the-job training was the only way new entrants into the prosthetics field acquired their skills; the training that a new employee received obviously depended upon his particular employment setting. A formal apprenticeship program was developed through the efforts of industry leaders, but very few commercial facilities are known to have participated in such a program. It was not until the early fifties, however, that circumstances permitted the establishment in the United States of the first full-time prosthetics education program in a university setting. Understand-

ably, the advances in the prosthetics research program provided the impetus for the establishment of this pioneering education program at UCLA.

After World War II, the prosthetics research program had devoted a great deal of its efforts to upper-limb prosthetics. The research project at UCLA was amassing a wealth of material on all aspects of upper-limb prosthetics. While this was going on, the Veterans Administration was developing a network of orthopedic and prosthetic clinic teams throughout the country, organized, incidentally, as an outgrowth of the teamwork efforts in the suction-socket school program. The time was ripe for the dissemination of the research material on upper-limb prosthetics not only to VA's clinic team personnel, but also to the many practitioners in the non-VA medical and rehabilitation community, as well. The Veterans Administration had then, and still has, the responsibility of disseminating results of its prosthetics research program in the interests of *all* disabled people. It was decided that the most effective mechanism for disseminating the results of the research program on artificial limbs would be for the Veterans Administration to support the establishment of a prosthetics school at UCLA. This was done and, beginning in 1953, teams of physicians, therapists, and prosthetists began to attend the UCLA course-offerings in upper-extremity prosthetics. Later, as new research developments became available, courses in lower-extremity prosthetics were introduced.

The success of this first formal school program prompted the Veterans Administration to fund the establishment of a prosthetics school at New York University in 1956. In 1959 a third school was organized at Northwestern University, but with the funding by the then Vocational Rehabilitation Administration. Financial support for the three schools has continued to be provided since 1959 by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and its predecessor agency titles. Since 1971 the Veterans Administration has supplemented funds provided by HEW. Although the three schools initially limited their offerings to short-term courses in prosthetics, they all have since added courses in orthotics, so that today *any* clinician—physician, therapist, prosthetist, orthotist—has available to him a wide choice of short-term, intensive courses in all of the major facets of prosthetics and orthotics. The Veterans Administration has relied in great measure upon the availability of these short-term courses for the training of its clinicians. Moreover, its artificial-limb contracts, for many years, have contained the requirement that commercial prosthetists satisfactorily complete certain courses before they can become eligible to fit and align specific devices for VA beneficiaries.

Through the years, there continued to be a constantly growing awareness on the part of prosthetic and orthotic practitioners and their organizations of the professional role they were being called on to play

in the rehabilitation of disabled people. Their specialized contributions in the deliberations of clinic teams, both in VA and non-VA settings, were increasingly sought and respected by other team members. They took advantage of the new and advanced courses being offered by the prosthetic schools. Practitioners organized and participated in many national and regional technical meetings and symposia. Most recently, their efforts at professionalism resulted in the organization of the American Academy of Orthotists and Prosthetists, which is dedicated to the professional growth and advancement of orthotic and prosthetic practitioners. The American Board for Certification in Orthotics and Prosthetics continued to make highly significant contributions to the advancement of the status of prosthetists and orthotists. The Board has always recognized its responsibility for the development and upholding of standards and requirements for the education of its practitioners, and for the continuing appraisal of facilities seeking certification. Educational standards required for application for the certification examinations have constantly been raised. By 1980, for example, an applicant will have to be a college graduate, preferably with a major in prosthetics and orthotics. This examination process itself has been improved to permit a fair and objective evaluation of the competence of the practitioner. Similarly, the Board has shown a commendable concern that its certified practitioners comply with its canons of ethical conduct. Instances of alleged deviations fortunately have been relatively few. A continuing education system for retention of certified status is now being developed, another step which bodes well for the advancement of the profession. It has been heartening to know that with these efforts at attaining professional recognition there has been an accompanying appreciation for the societal responsibilities and obligations required of any group which purports to be professional, particularly a discipline whose members provide services to severely disabled individuals.

One must cite the substantial contributions made by a number of other groups and institutions toward the continued elevation of standards for prosthetics and orthotics practice. The establishment at New York University, in 1960, of the first 4-year baccalaureate program in prosthetics and orthotics was a most noteworthy step in assuring that new entrants into the field would bring with them a better and more well-rounded background, and hopefully, a more professional approach to the problems of prosthetic and orthotic restoration. Since this pioneer program at NYU, a bachelor's degree program has been set up at the University of Washington; similar programs are being considered at Northwestern University and at UCLA. The 10-month certificate program developed by UCLA represents another source for training at the professional level. Preference is given to applicants with a baccalaureate degree and one or more years of experience in prosthetics and orthotics. The 2-year associate

of arts degree programs at Northwestern University, in cooperation with Southeast Junior College in Chicago, and at Cerritos College in Norwalk, California, have similarly produced graduates who can be expected to develop as professional people. The financial support given by the Social and Rehabilitation Service, HEW, for bachelor- and associate-degree programs has been greatly appreciated.

The Committee on Prosthetic-Orthotic Education and the Committee on Prosthetics Research and Development, of the National Research Council, have been in the forefront with activities and programs designed to raise educational standards and improve clinical practice. The Ponta Vedra Workshop, for example, sponsored by the Committee on Prosthetic-Orthotic Education in 1970, is considered to have produced a most significant contribution to the educational and professional advancement of the prosthetics-orthotics fields. With all interested groups represented, the participants developed a series of job descriptions for orthotists and prosthetists in this country to be used as a basis for identifying educational goals; clarified interrelations between bachelor and associate degree programs; and developed sets of guidelines for educational institutions desirous of offering such degree programs. The material developed at this session provided a framework for the American Board for Certification in Orthotics and Prosthetics to petition for formal recognition as the accrediting authority in these fields.

The Committee on Prosthetics Research and Development has always been concerned with programs to improve clinical practice. This committee has worked closely with the educational institutions to assure that newly developed devices and techniques are effectively introduced into school curricula. The efforts of the committee have resulted in the availability of manuals, films, and other instructional material useful to the prosthetics-orthotics education programs.

The University Council on Orthotics-Prosthetics Education (UCOPE) has provided a mechanism for all teaching institutions to discuss problems of common interest and to develop new curricular material and teaching aids. Provision is made for representatives from all interested groups in the field to participate in meetings with UCOPE to discuss professional and educational problems.

Yes, we've come a long way in the last two decades, but we must continue our cooperative efforts to advance educationally and professionally. A profession is not created by fiat; practitioners must continue to demonstrate that they are worthy of being regarded and accepted as professionals. The educational structure, providing the life blood of professionalism, must continue to be supported and strengthened. Financial support is essential to assure the continued operation of both the short- and the long-term educational programs. If professionalism is to be meaningful, practitioners must continue to evidence an appre-

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ciation and respect for the role of educational programs in prosthetics-orthotics management. *The disabled clients we serve deserve no less.*