



# Douglas A. Atwood



Douglas A. Atwood, MD, DMD  
September 25, 1922 – June 29, 2010

Douglas Allan Atwood was a second-generation dentist born in Boston. From the early age of ten he began to dream of attending Harvard Dental School like his father and practicing with him. He felt blessed by “having a perfectionistic mother and a respected father who loved his patients and whose patients loved him.”

Doug spent six years at Roxbury Latin School (grade 7-12) where “education was also a worthy way of life.” His dream was to include teaching as well as clinical practice in his professional plans.

Dr. Atwood graduated Amherst College (1943) and was excited to learn Harvard had expanded the medical basis for dental education. One of the happiest moments of his life was when he told his parents that he had been accepted to the newly

renamed Harvard School of Dental Medicine (HSDM). He was admitted to both Harvard Medical School and HSDM under HSDM’s MD/DMD degree program. He was simultaneously commissioned a lieutenant in the U.S. Army which later decided not to accept Harvard’s five-year training program in dentistry, so Doug received his MD in 1946. He then had a fifteen-month internship at Boston City Hospital and spent two years as a surgeon in the U.S. Army Medical Corps earning the rank of captain before returning to Harvard in 1949 to complete his DMD *cum laude* in 1951- he never lost his dream. Doug then spent three years as a dentist at the West Roxbury and Boston Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals prior to joining his father in private practice.

Dr. Atwood’s teaching career began on a part-time basis in 1951 and expanded in 1955 when he began to spend half of his professional time at HSDM. He continued his love of research and teaching and in 1958 was elected as an associate fellow in the Academy of Denture Prosthetics (now the Academy of

Prosthodontics), the most prestigious organization in the field. He was elected to full fellowship in 1964. Doug loved the Academy and its commitment to the science of prosthodontics. He always played an active role, rising through the ranks to become its president in 1980. As part-time faculty Doug also worked his way up at HSDM to associate clinical professor of prosthetic dentistry. After eighteen years in private practice, he made the difficult decision in 1972 to accept a full-time appointment as professor and head of the Department of Prosthetic Dentistry at HSDM.

No one worked harder for HSDM than Dr. Atwood. In addition to being a department head, he was assistant dean for development (1970-1975) working with Dean Paul Goldhaber and head of development, Mr. Richard Carroll. He also served as the director of clinics 1972-1982. It should be noted that all three of these positions are individually full-time jobs, which Doug accepted with aplomb. If that were not already a herculean effort, Doug started a post-doctoral program in prosthodontics, modernized the general dentistry service at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, served for seven years as general chairman of the Alumni Faculty Campaign, served as president of the HSDM chapter of Omicron Kappa Upsilon honor society, president of the Harvard Odontological Society, served as the HSDM delegate to the Associated Harvard Alumni and served on the executive committee of the medical staff at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital.

During the 1980's in addition to his research, teaching and administrative activities at HSDM, Dr. Atwood advanced the dental profession nationally serving as a consultant to the American Dental Association's Councils on Dental Education and Hospital Dental Service and its Commission on Accreditation. Doug also served as the HSDM delegate to the American Association of Dental Schools and a member of its sections for Removable Prosthodontics, Postdoctoral Education, and Clinical Directors sections. He also chaired the I.R. Hardy Prosthetic Conference and served as president of the Prosthodontics Research Group of the International Association for Dental Research (IADR) and of the Federation of Prosthodontic Organizations (FPO). In 1970 he was instrumental in reorganizing the FPO into the American College of Prosthodontists (ACP), which became the sponsoring organization of the specialty of prosthodontics, and he was recognized with the ACP's President's Award in 2007 for his accomplishment.

While a student at Harvard, Doug was inspired by Dr. A. Leroy Johnson, HSDM dean 1942-47, who emphasized research to address dental problems. Doug's dream expanded to include the triad of patient care, teaching, and research. At the West Roxbury VA Hospital, his major research interest was the anatomical, metabolic, and prosthetic factors in the etiology of bone resorption under artificial dentures culminating in his seminal publication establishing reduction of residual ridges as a major oral disease entity which became known in the field as "RRR" (Reduction of residual ridges: a major oral disease entity. Atwood DA. *Journal of Prosthetic Dentistry (JPD)* 1971; 26:266-79). This research won him awards from the IADR, and the Jerome M. and Dorothy Schweitzer Research Award from the Greater New York Academy of Prosthodontics, ultimately leading to his being called the "father of Residual Ridge Resorption research."

Doug authored numerous papers during his career, all with a common theme of biologic research in prosthodontics. He introduced biologically based research to prosthodontics through his work on “RRR.” In that regard he was one of the early pioneers in the dental profession connecting the mouth to the rest of the body. He demonstrated that “RRR” is chronic, progressive and irreversible. It was a key observation toward restoration of the failing dentition affecting millions of people worldwide.

As a forward thinker and educator, when osseointegrated dental implants were first being introduced to North America in the early 1980s, Doug published in the *JPD* (1984), that the pioneers gained competence through their pre-existing abilities, surgical or prosthodontic competencies and through experience and trial and error. He noted that there was still no accredited educational system for implant dentistry. His foresight identified that the difficulty was the overlapping of two well-developed specialties, oral and maxillofacial surgery, and prosthodontics. He predicted the need to develop more and improved advanced education in prosthodontics related to implants. He strongly supported bringing implant prosthodontics into the formal dental educational system when the majority preferred the status quo. In 2016 his pioneering vision was realized when the ADA Commission on Dental Accreditation incorporated surgical implant placement and restoration into the specialty educational standards of prosthodontics.

In 1981, HSDM recognized Dr. Atwood’s accomplishments with a Distinguished Faculty Award with the citation “Teacher, researcher, clinician and administrator, you have managed to wear four hats without getting a swelled head.” He didn’t just wear the hats. He wore them with distinction. Dean Goldhaber encouraged Doug to come to the school full time believing he could do more good because of the “multiplier effect.” After the Academy of Prosthodontics (AP) meeting in Boston in 2003, he wrote “I had a dream that we could build a postdoctoral program in prosthodontics at Harvard which would help outstanding individuals fulfill their own dreams of contributing to the art, science, and practice of the specialty based on the pursuit of excellence.” Uniquely he developed individualized learning tracks for enrolled residents to accomplish this. In 1974 he did just that when he started the HSDM Advanced Prosthodontic Program. Twenty-nine years later at the 2003 AP meeting he remarked, “Today being in the midst of some of the fruit of that program is one of the proudest and happiest days of my life: a dream fulfilled.”

Steve Campbell writes, “What can the right mentor do? The one that rarely makes the *CV* is the impact on the people whose life’s they touch. Highly influential mentors offer more than one-on-one experiences, they create environments that nurture and inspire. Doug provided that for me and everyone he touched. I stayed in Academics and prospered due to him. His dream became my dream. How do you measure things like that? Thanks just isn’t enough.”

Lawrence Gettleman writes, “as a student in the mid-1960’s, Doug gave authoritative lectures on the consequences of tooth extraction: loss of supporting jawbone (RRR), and proper complete denture construction. In the 1970’s, he took on three major roles at HSDM: department chair (prosthetic

dentistry), clinic director, and development director (all full-time positions), but HSDM couldn't afford the extra hires. It survived a precarious time as dental schools were folding. Doug was a driving force at HSDM and a mentor to many young faculty members."

George Kaye writes, "Above all I remember Doug Atwood as the most kind and gentle instructor I ever had. His smile and gentle ways always encouraged the speaker during his seminar courses to explore the subject deeper. He truly enjoyed his students' growth and achievement. He had a lot to teach, but the most important thing I learned from him was how to treat my own students, with respect and joy at their progress."

Edwin Riley, writes, "He genuinely cared about others and always did his best for patients, students and faculty. Former students describe him as a highly influential mentor, a father figure, a gentleman's gentleman, and a man of integrity, humility and kindness."

Paul Schnitman PD'74 writes, "I recall, walking through the clinic with Doug one day, proudly telling him I had just been invited to chair a committee in a national clinical organization. In true Dr. Atwood mentoring fashion and with a warm reassuring voice, he said 'concentrate on your research, organization work will come soon enough and then you will wonder where you will find time to continue your research'. As always, he was right!"

In his comments accepting the Harvard Distinguished Alumni Award in 1993, Doug said "without the support, encouragement, listening, wisdom, stability and love of my wife, Minnie, none of this would have happened." Doug and Minnie were happily married for 63 years and together created a warm and loving home and family of 6 children - Steven, Thomas, James, Frederick, Daniel, Laura and 14 grandchildren. Doug always said he had three families, one in West Roxbury with his wife and their six children, one at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine and a nationwide, professional family to which he was so closely connected.

The Atwood's were a family of deep Christian faith. We all remember times at his home, the warmth and embracing love. The times when his wife, Minnie, would go over to the organ and break into religious hymns, celebrating God in their lives. They were Members of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Chatham and Emanuel Episcopal Church in West Roxbury where Doug served several terms on Vestry and as Ward.

In retirement Doug spent many happy years at Goose Pond in Chatham, Massachusetts where he loved to swim and continued working for its conservation.

At the 50th reunion of his graduation from Harvard Medical School, when asked for his advice to graduates of the class of 1996, Doug said, "It is better to give than to receive. Find something you like to which you can give yourself and give it your best."

Doug certainly loved Harvard and gave Harvard his best!

Respectfully submitted,

Paul A. Schnitman DDS, MSD, *Chairperson*

Stephen Campbell, DDS, MMSc

Lawrence Gettleman, DMD, MSD

George W. Kay, DMD

Edwin Riley, III, DMD