

YOUR STORY MATTERS

DENIBE



2025

DENOB I
A W A R D S

**SONYA DUNBAR &
MELISSA TURNER**



2025 DENOBI AWARDS SHORTLIST

Congratulations to these distinguished individuals and teams for their exceptional contributions in fostering positive change within their communities, one smile at a time!

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EVA GRAYZEL, SPEAKER & AUTHOR	SARAH COTTINGHAM, RDH
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JENNIFER BOYCE, DMD	SYLVIA FRESMANN, DH, BSC
JESSICA ATKINSON, RDH, BSDH, MED, FADHA	THOMAS VIOLA, R.PH., CCP, CDE, CPMP
JESSICA WOODS, MPH, RDH, FADHA	TIFFANY WUEBBEN, RDH
JOEL BERG, DDS, MS	WENYUAN SHI, PHD, CEO

TEAMS

BALLANTYNE DENTISTRY
DEE FOR DENTIST
CHILDREN'S DENTAL SERVICES
NUVIA DENTAL IMPLANT CENTER
PIP PEDIATRICS & ORTHODONTICS
SAGE DENTAL REGIONAL HYGIENE TEAM
THE SMILE ZONE
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JASDEEP KAUR CHEEMA

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DORA AND RAYMOND
PASQUEDA OF
THE SMILE ZONE

From the Editor



Sonya Dunbar

Melissa Turner

A trailblazer in geriatric oral health, Sonya Dunbar is a passionate advocate for dental care among seniors. With over 25 years of experience spanning private practice, academia, and marketing, Sonya has been a driving force behind innovative solutions to improve oral hygiene and access to care for aging populations.

As Founder and CEO of The Geriatric Toothfairy and Co-Owner of Mobile Dental Xpress, she has tirelessly worked to raise awareness and provide solutions for the overlooked issue of poor oral health in seniors. Sonya's leadership extends further as a Co-Founder of The National Mobile Dentistry Conference and the American Mobile Dentistry Alliance, where she fosters collaboration, education, and growth within the mobile dental community.

Beyond her professional work, Sonya is a TEDx speaker, business coach, and industry influencer, known for her dynamic presence and ability to inspire those around her.

Her unwavering dedication to saving seniors from the dangers of neglected oral health has left an indelible mark on dentistry and healthcare alike.

A visionary entrepreneur and industry innovator, Melissa K. Turner has dedicated over 20 years to advancing the dental profession through technology, inclusion, and collaboration. Known for her forward-thinking leadership, Melissa is a sought-after executive, consultant, and speaker, constantly pushing the industry toward a more innovative and inclusive future.

As a founding board member of the American Mobile & Teledentistry Alliance, Melissa is leading the way in mobile and teledentistry advancements, ensuring that dental care is more accessible and patient-centered. She also spearheads initiatives such as the Cellerant Best of Class Hygiene Awards and has co-founded influential industry events, including The Denobi Awards and the National Mobile & Teledentistry Conference.

Melissa's influence extends through her global network, I Heart Dentistry, and her influencer persona, @thetoothgirl, where she passionately advocates for practitioner well-being and progressive change in dentistry. Her ability to bring innovation, collaboration, and advocacy together makes her a true changemaker in the field.

The Denobi Awards 2025 took place on March 1st in Portland, Oregon, bringing together the brightest minds and most dedicated professionals in dentistry from around the world. This annual event is more than just a celebration—it is a showcase of excellence, innovation, and leadership in our industry. From clinicians and educators to advocates and entrepreneurs, the Denobi Awards honor those who are pushing boundaries, transforming patient care, and shaping the future of dentistry.

Each honoree and nominee carries a story of perseverance, passion, and impact—stories that deserve to be told, shared, and celebrated.

The Visionaries Behind the Denobi Awards

At the heart of this prestigious event are two remarkable leaders who have dedicated their careers to elevating the profession and fostering a culture of recognition and innovation in dentistry.

A Heartfelt Thank You

To each of the extraordinary individuals shortlisted for the Denobi Awards 2025—thank you for sharing your journeys with me. Your dedication, resilience, and commitment to the profession inspire us all, and it has been an absolute privilege to tell your stories.

To Melissa and Sonya—thank you for giving me the opportunity to cover this incredible event. Your vision, leadership, and passion have created something truly special—an event that recognizes excellence and elevates the voices of those making a difference in dentistry.

The Denobi Awards are more than just an evening of celebration; they are a testament to the impact and future of dentistry. And as we look ahead, I have no doubt that this industry will continue to grow, evolve, and inspire, just like the individuals we honor here today.

Here's to another year of innovation, collaboration, and excellence in dentistry!

Carl Demadema
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

SHORTLIST



AMOL NIRGUDKAR



ANDREINA SUCRE



ANGELA DAVIS-SULLIVAN



ANTHONY SMITH



ASHLEIGH ROBINSON



BETSY DAVIS



BILLIE PRISBY



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CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS



COURTNEY JUSTICE



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DEANNA RANDALL -
ALEXANDER



DIRK ZIEBOLZ



DORA PESQUEDA



ELAINE BYLIS



EMILY STEIN



EMMA GUZMAN



EMME SANDERS



ERIC BLOCK



EVA GRAYZEL

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HEATHER BOLTON



HOWARD FARRAN



JANET CROSSWHITE



JASDEEP KAUR CHEEMA



JAY GEIER



JEANETTE MACLEAN



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JENNIFER BOYCE

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JESSICA WOODS



JOEL BERG



KARI CARTER-CHERELUS



KATHARINE MARTINEZ



KATHLEEN BOKROSSY



KENTUCKY MORROW



KIANOR SHAH



KIM KUTSCH

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MARC LIECHTUNG



MARCUS COWAN



MARIYA FILIPOVA



MARY E. FOLEY

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MELIA LEWIS



MICHELLE DOWLING



MISTY MATTINGLY



NICHOLAAS GEURS



PHILLIP HARTLAGE



RACHEL ANN SANNER



RELLA CHRISTENSEN



RICK PETERSON



SAJEESH KUMAR

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SARAH BALASTER



SARAH COTTINGHAM



SARAH CROW



SHANNON MCCARTHY



SHAWN OPRISIU



SHEENA HINSON



SHELBEY AREVELO



SHELLEY BROWN



STEPHANIE

THE
DENOBI
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STEVEN DUFFIN



SYLVIA FRESMANN



THOMAS VIOLA



TIFFANY WUEBBEN



WENYUAN SHI

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BALLANTYNE
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CENTER



PIP DENTAL PARTNERS



SAGE DENTAL REGIONAL
HYGIENE TEAM



THE SMILE ZONE



TOOTH DOCS



WORLD MISSION PARTNERS

THE
DENOBIA
AWARDS

2025

Michelle Dowling

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF
MARKETING AT RECTANGLE HEALTH

MY CAREER HAS BEEN A JOURNEY OF EMPOWERING BUSINESSES, STARTING IN FINTECH WHERE I WITNESSED THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EFFICIENT PAYMENT SYSTEMS. I WAS CAPTIVATED BY THE EVOLUTION OF PAYMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON OUR ECONOMY. FROM ACCOUNTING, RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT, TO MARKETING, I'VE SEEN HOW EFFECTIVE, WELL-STRUCTURED PAYMENTS CAPABILITIES CAN POSITIVELY IMPACT AN ORGANIZATION.

I'VE SPENT THE LAST DECADE IMMERSSED IN THE HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY, DEVELOPING AND EXECUTING MARKETING STRATEGIES TO REACH DENTAL PRACTICES FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF EMPOWERING THEM TO ACHIEVE GREATER EFFICIENCY AND FINANCIAL STABILITY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY.

I LEVERAGE MY EXPERTISE IN MARKETING, STRATEGY, AND OPERATIONS TO EQUIP PRACTICES WITH THE TOOLS AND KNOWLEDGE THEY NEED TO THRIVE. I BELIEVE THAT EVERY ORGANIZATION, REGARDLESS OF SIZE, CAN ACHIEVE FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL WELL-BEING, AND I'M COMMITTED TO HELPING THEM REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.



MICHELLE DOWLING

Payments evolves rapidly – from cash, check, credit and debit cards to online and mobile functionality - and there are even faster, more automated ways on the horizon. Healthcare needs to mirror these shifts as well. I applied my knowledge to help practices navigate the complexities of revenue cycle management and this ignited a deep desire to make a difference.

I believe in the power of education and community. This has been my guiding principle on how to support the healthcare industry. Through thought leadership, content creation, and engaging with industry leaders, I strive to inspire and support dental professionals in their pursuit of growth. I'm fortunate to have collaborated with leading names in the industry, including PlanetDDS, Carestream, Henry Schein, and XLDent, gaining valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities facing practices today.

We are making a difference in the dental industry by creating high-quality, accessible content that empowers practices to make informed decisions and drive growth. We prioritize supporting the healthcare community through sponsorships, philanthropic initiatives, and by providing dedicated support to our clients.

As a member of the Women in DSO advisory board and Charlotte's Women in Tech for Good, I am committed to empowering and supporting women in our industry.

It is humbling to be shortlisted for a Denobi Award. For the last decade, my heart has been poured into championing the power of technology to strengthen healthcare practices, especially within the dental industry. It's a passion that burns bright within me.

I have such deep respect for the incredible individuals on the front lines – the ones running the practices, caring for patients, mastering the latest clinical advancements. They are the true heroes of healthcare.

I believe that by equipping dental practices with the tools and knowledge they need to succeed, we can create a healthier and more accessible healthcare system for all. My passion lies in helping practices create better experiences for staff and patients alike, and I am honored to be recognized for my contributions to the dental industry.

I believe that making healthcare more accessible is a mission worth fighting for. In my current position at Rectangle Health, we believe we can contribute to that mission, one practice at a time. By helping practices achieve greater financial, operational, and administrative efficiency,

we empower them to see more patients, offer more financial options to access care, and ultimately, take better care of oral health. That's what drives us.

This Denobi nomination is both an honor, and most importantly, it's fuel for the fire. It validates the work I'm doing with my team, inspires us to push even further and find even more innovative ways to support practices and organizations in their vital work. It's a reminder that we're on the right path, and we need to keep moving forward, together.

A black and white portrait of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, smiling slightly. She is wearing a dark, ribbed, long-sleeved sweater and a plaid skirt. The background is a solid, light-colored wall.

Brittany Cox

MA, RDH, MADHA, MAADH

MY JOURNEY INTO DENTISTRY WASN'T CONVENTIONAL, BUT IT WAS DEEPLY PERSONAL. I INITIALLY SET OUT TO BECOME A PHYSIOLOGIST, BUT LIFE HAD OTHER PLANS. AT 16, I BECAME PREGNANT WITH MY FIRST SON—A PIVOTAL MOMENT THAT RESHAPED MY FUTURE. I KNEW I NEEDED A CAREER THAT PROVIDED STABILITY WHILE ALLOWING ME TO MAKE A MEANINGFUL IMPACT. DENTISTRY, SPECIFICALLY DENTAL HYGIENE, BECAME MY CALLING.

AT 19, I GRADUATED AS ONE OF THE YOUNGEST IN MY CLASS, EAGER TO CARVE OUT A PATH THAT BLENDED SCIENCE, HEALTHCARE, AND EDUCATION. OVER THE PAST DECADE, I HAVE WORKED AS A DENTAL HYGIENIST SPECIALIZING IN PERIODONTICS, WITH A FOCUS ON PATIENT-CENTERED CARE, PREVENTION, AND ORAL-SYSTEMIC HEALTH. HOWEVER, ALONG THE WAY, I RECOGNIZED A GAP IN OUR INDUSTRY—ONE THAT EXTENDED BEYOND PATIENT CARE AND INTO THE VERY WAY WE OPERATE AS DENTAL PROFESSIONALS.

BRITTANY COX

Despite dentistry's advancements, its environmental impact has been largely overlooked. I saw an opportunity to create meaningful change, and that realization sparked a passion that has since defined my career: guiding dentistry toward a more sustainable and eco-conscious future.

My work extends beyond the operatory. Through consulting, speaking engagements, and educational initiatives, I empower dental professionals to rethink their approach to sustainability. I have collaborated with dental manufacturers to explore eco-friendly product alternatives, advised practices on reducing waste without compromising care, and educated industry leaders on the intersection of sustainability and profitability. My courses and keynote presentations focus on integrating sustainable practices into daily workflows, proving that environmental responsibility can enhance efficiency, patient outcomes, and business success.

As part of my mission, I have developed programs that not only teach dental teams how to reduce their carbon footprint but also reframe the role of dental hygienists as agents of change—leaders in prevention, early intervention, and sustainability. I firmly believe that hygienists are not just clinicians but educators, advocates, and integral members of the healthcare system. By equipping them with the tools to drive change, we are transforming the future of dentistry from the inside out.

Beyond the industry, I strive to embody sustainability in my personal life. As a millennial homemaker, I am intentional about the choices I make for my family—whether it's reducing waste, supporting local farmers, or being mindful of the chemicals we introduce into our home. My journey toward sustainability is not just professional; it's personal.

Being recognized for my work in sustainable dentistry is more than just an accolade—it's a reflection of the progress we are making as an industry. To be shortlisted among other visionaries in dentistry is both humbling and validating. It signifies that conversations about sustainability are gaining traction, that the changes we are implementing matter, and that the future of dentistry is evolving.

This recognition is not just for me but for every dental professional who has embraced the challenge of doing better—for our patients, our industry, and our planet. It is a reminder that even in a field rooted in tradition, there is space for innovation, growth, and transformation. I am honored to be part of this movement and excited for what the future holds.



UPHOLDING ETHICAL STANDARDS IN DENTAL CARE AMID POLICY CHANGES

By Brittany Cox
Photography by Cedric Fauntleroy

As dental professionals, we adhere to a code of ethics that prioritizes patient autonomy, confidentiality, societal trust, and equitable care distribution. However, recent policy changes affecting healthcare threaten these ethical principles, posing significant challenges to access to care, public health, and professional autonomy.

Remaining silent allows external influences to dictate the quality and accessibility of care we provide, ultimately compromising the well-being of the communities we serve. Now more than ever, it is imperative for dental professionals to educate themselves, advocate for their profession, and stand up for the patients who rely on us.

Threats to Individual Autonomy and Informed Consent

At the core of ethical dental care lies individual autonomy—the right of patients to make informed decisions about their oral health. Policy changes that limit access to transparent healthcare information, restrict patient choice, or create barriers to care fundamentally violate this principle. For instance, reductions in preventive dental services may leave patients with fewer options, potentially leading to more invasive and costly treatments later on. Without access to necessary information or choices, patients cannot make fully informed decisions, eroding their autonomy and increasing the risk of adverse health outcomes. As professionals, it's our responsibility to ensure patients have the knowledge and resources to make educated decisions about their oral health. This requires advocating for transparency, access, and patient choice.

Confidentiality and Safe Care Spaces

Confidentiality is essential for patient-provider trust. However, certain policy changes may inadvertently create fear among vulnerable communities, deterring them from seeking care. Regardless of social stance, many individuals already face healthcare barriers. Creating a clinical environment where patients feel secure is essential to our ethical principle of non-maleficence—our duty to avoid harm. By allowing fear to influence healthcare access, we indirectly contribute to worsening health disparities. As professionals, we must advocate for safe, confidential spaces where all patients feel secure receiving care.



The Importance of DEI in Care

Another concerning trend is the restriction of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in healthcare. While DEI programs aim to reduce disparities and ensure equitable access to healthcare, limiting these initiatives can result in reduced training on cultural competence and implicit bias for healthcare providers. This could lead to fewer programs addressing oral health disparities in marginalized communities and reduced funding for research on social determinants of health and their impact on oral health outcomes. The principle of justice and fairness demands equitable distribution of healthcare resources. Failing to support inclusive healthcare initiatives risks leaving large segments of the population behind.

The Role of Research in Advancing Dental Care

Scientific research forms the foundation of evidence-based practice in dentistry, guiding everything from preventive care strategies to treatment protocols. Reductions in funding for dental research threaten public health progress and patient care. Diminished support for research on the oral-systemic health connection weakens our ability to address public health crises. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role of collaborative health initiatives in disease control and healthcare improvement. Supporting scientific research promotes individual and public well-being and aligns with our ethical duty of beneficence.

Erosion of Societal Trust in Healthcare

Public trust in healthcare is fragile, and every policy decision influences how patients perceive our profession. Decisions that reduce healthcare accessibility, limit provider autonomy, or prioritize non-clinical interests over patient well-being breed skepticism and distrust.

When circumstances undermine dental professionals' ability to deliver optimal care, they convey that patient health ranks secondary to bureaucratic concerns. Upholding societal trust requires advocating for ethical practices, maintaining transparency, and ensuring our actions align with patient-centered care commitments.

Justice and Fairness in Access to Care

Ensuring justice and fairness in healthcare remains a significant ethical challenge. Barriers to care through funding limitations, restrictive licensing laws, or limitations on provider scope of practice widen gaps between those who can afford care and those who cannot. Every individual deserves access to high-quality, affordable dental care. As providers, we must challenge inequities and strive for solutions that enhance oral healthcare accessibility for all.

Combating Misinformation in Healthcare Policy

Veracity, the obligation to tell the truth, is foundational in dentistry. In an era where misinformation can shape healthcare perceptions, it's crucial to maintain commitment to honesty. If misconceptions about healthcare services, insurance coverage, or provider roles persist, we have a duty to correct them. Providing accurate information to patients, colleagues, and stakeholders facilitates informed decision-making across all levels.

Call to Action

The ethical foundations of our profession are under constant pressure, and silence is not an option. As dental professionals, we must:

Educate ourselves on changes impacting care access, provider autonomy, and public health.

Speak up by engaging with industry organizations, supporting professional collaborations, and advocating for ethical healthcare policies.

Unite as a profession to ensure our values—autonomy, justice, beneficence, and veracity—shape industry standards.

Find organizations that align with your values and engage in education, collaboration, and advocacy. It's time to get involved, strengthen our collective voice, and uphold our profession's ethical integrity.

Policy changes wield far-reaching impacts on care access, public health, and professional autonomy. By actively shaping the environment governing our field, we safeguard our ability to deliver ethical, patient-centered care.

Let this serve as a call to action for all dental professionals: Stand up for your profession, protect your patients, and ensure our ethical principles remain central to healthcare practices.



Marc Liechtung

DMD

DR. MARC LIECHTUNG'S JOURNEY INTO DENTISTRY WAS NOT A PREDETERMINED ONE. RAISED IN A FAMILY DEEPLY INVOLVED IN REAL ESTATE, HE INITIALLY SEEMED HEADED DOWN THAT PATH. HOWEVER, A PIVOTAL CONVERSATION WITH HIS FATHER DURING A HOLIDAY DINNER SET HIM ON A DIFFERENT TRAJECTORY, URGING HIM TO FIND HIS OWN CALLING. AFTER EXPLORING OTHER PROFESSIONS, HE FOUND HIS PASSION IN DENTISTRY, SPECIFICALLY DRAWN TO ITS COMBINATION OF SCIENCE AND CREATIVITY. THIS REALIZATION LED HIM TO THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL OF DENTAL MEDICINE, WHERE HIS JOURNEY INTO THE DENTAL PROFESSION TRULY BEGAN.

MARC LIECHTUNG

The Dual Nature of Dentistry What truly captivated Dr. Liechtung was the way dentistry blends both science and art. With a background in various hands-on creative pursuits, including painting, carving, and playing the piano, he found that dentistry allowed him to harness these skills to improve the lives of others. He was particularly drawn to the craft of transforming smiles, enhancing function, and improving quality of life—all while emphasizing long-term care and prevention.

Extending Impact Beyond Practice As Dr. Liechtung's career developed, he recognized his potential to influence dentistry beyond his own practice. Through innovation, entrepreneurship, and mentorship, he expanded his reach. He created Snap-On Smile, contributed to multiple group practices, and shared his expertise through podcasts and speaking engagements. His mentorship of early-career dentists has become one of the most rewarding aspects of his journey, providing guidance to help them navigate the challenges of treatment planning and practice management.

The Power of Mentorship and Innovation Dr. Liechtung's role as a mentor has become an essential part of his professional life. Not only has he built successful practices in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and New Jersey, but his work with emerging dentists has allowed him to guide them through the nuances of clinical excellence and business decisions. His involvement in mentorship provides an opportunity to give back to the profession by sharing his hard-earned lessons. He feels that it's crucial for experienced professionals to help the next generation, as it's a mutually beneficial relationship that keeps the entire field evolving.

Creating Snap-On Smile: A Breakthrough in Dentistry One of Dr. Liechtung's key achievements is the creation of the Snap-On Smile, a multi-purpose restorative appliance that has revolutionized cosmetic and restorative dentistry. The product allows patients to achieve an improved smile with minimal dental intervention. The invention of Snap-On Smile demonstrated his innovation and commitment to making dentistry accessible and effective for all,

further establishing him as a pioneer in his field.

The Denobi Award Nomination and a Lifelong Commitment Dr. Liechtung's recent Denobi Award nomination marked a major milestone in his career. Being nominated alongside other trailblazers in the field was a humbling experience, as it recognized his contributions not just as a clinician but also as a leader, mentor, and innovator. Reflecting on his journey, he expresses immense gratitude for the mentors and colleagues who have shaped him, and he remains committed to giving back to the profession. His mission continues to be innovating, educating, and inspiring the next generation of dentists—further cementing his lifelong dedication to the profession.

Billie Prisby

CEO AND FOUNDER OF
PRESTOSMILE AI

MY JOURNEY HAS BEEN A WILD RIDE FILLED WITH UPS AND DOWNS THAT HAVE SHAPED WHO I AM TODAY. GROWING UP WASN'T EASY. I WAS BORN TO A YOUNG MOM WHO HAD THREE KIDS BY THE TIME SHE WAS TWENTY, AND WE LIVED IN A TOUGH NEIGHBORHOOD. THOSE EARLY YEARS TAUGHT ME A LOT ABOUT LOYALTY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY, BUT DEEP DOWN, I ALWAYS FELT LIKE I WAS MEANT FOR SOMETHING MORE, EVEN IF I WASN'T SURE WHAT THAT WAS.

SCHOOL WAS A STRUGGLE FOR ME. I FACED A LOT OF CHALLENGES, INCLUDING AN UNDIAGNOSED LEARNING DISABILITY, AUDITORY PROCESSING ISSUES, AND SENSORY SENSITIVITIES. THIS LED ME TO DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL THREE TIMES. BUT EVERYTHING CHANGED WHEN MY AUNT—WHO STEPPED IN AS A MOTHER FIGURE—BELIEVED IN ME AND PUSHED ME TO FINISH MY EDUCATION. WITH HER SUPPORT, I FINALLY GRADUATED FROM MILLVILLE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL AT 19, NEARLY 20. FUN FACT: I HAD COACH TROUT, THE FATHER OF BASEBALL SUPERSTAR MIKE TROUT, AS ONE OF MY TEACHERS!



BILLIE PRISBY

After high school, I found myself at a crossroads. I started pursuing an associate's degree in business, thinking I could go into healthcare or radiology. But then, a friend, Dr. George Kourakin, asked me to fill in as a dental assistant when his regular assistant didn't show up. Honestly, my first thought was, "Ew, I have to be in people's mouths?" But loyalty to my friend won out, and I took the plunge. That moment changed everything for me.

I quickly realized that succeeding in the dental field meant doing things correctly. Back then, we didn't have the technology we do now, so I hit the library, used the good ol' Dewey Decimal System, and learned all about dental anatomy and procedures. My experience waiting tables taught me how to juggle multiple tasks at once and really sharpened my people skills, which were my secret weapon chairside.

When I returned to sunny South Florida, I landed a job at a busy multi-doctor dental office. However, I soon discovered that the high-pressure, non-patient-centric environment wasn't for me. Feeling lost and defeated by the lack of care for patients, I took a chance and answered a classified ad that promised flexible hours for dental assistants. This leap opened the door to a diverse career, allowing me to work in over 2,500 dental offices in my almost 30-year career, temping and doing undercover work to hone my craft. I dove into learning about different practices, realizing that patient care was about more than just clinical skills; it required effective business management, too.

During my 2,500-practice journey, I met Dr. Gary Kodish. This is when my career took a big turn. He invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into everyone on his team. He showed us what the true meaning of collaboration was, sharpened our clinical skills, and implemented Ritz Carlton's approach to patient care, which impacted the patient-practice journey.

I loved delivering high-quality dental care there. We all felt good about what we were doing, and we were sponges. After about five years, I decided to head back to college full-time at Nova Southeastern University, where I pursued a double major in Biology and Psychology, all in pursuit of dental school. I got excited about dental school. I was focused and dedicated. I even took the DAT and set up secondaries.

But at the last minute, something inside me said, "Wait. You can help more people if you focus on the human aspect of business." So, I switched gears and went for an MBA in marketing. That decision led me to consult struggling dental practices, sharing all the cool tools and tricks I'd picked up. I really wanted to help these practices thrive because I knew their potential.

Fast forward years later, I was about to join Gentle Dental here in South Florida and at the last minute, I decided to turn down the interview because I met Dr. Daniel Rovirosa. Dr. Rovirosa needed help building his practice while juggling family life. I saw an opportunity to make a substantial, impactful difference. Around the same time, I discovered that my daughter had the same learning disabilities I had faced. I was determined to have the time and resources that I would have building practices on my own. I needed to ensure she wouldn't struggle like I did, so I focused on her treatment while still supporting Dr. Rovirosa and others.

This was 12 years ago when we met, and he is now one of my business partners and our Chief Dental Officer for Presto Smile. As we worked together, we explored what team synergy was, making a practice stand out with Ritz Carlton customer service and new growth opportunities from phase 1 and 2 ortho and specialty services, including cosmetic dentistry.

When we realized patients wanted instant results, we then created Presto Smile. This initiative was all about meeting those desires while making practices run smoothly. Under the Presto umbrella, we emphasized comprehensive dental care, effective communication, and creating a fun work environment. We are more than just an app; we are the business partner dental professionals never knew they needed.

These days, my team and I are all about bridging the gap between patients and their dental experiences. We're reigniting the love and excitement for dentistry, breaking down walls between the front desk and the back office. We want to give dental professionals a lifeline to not just stay in the field but thrive—benefiting themselves, their patients, and the practices they work at. Our mission is to change lives, ensuring everyone feels supported on their dental journey.

I can't express how excited I feel about being shortlisted for this recognition. It's a reminder that all my hard work over nearly 30 years is being acknowledged. There have been so many days when I wondered if I was genuinely making a difference, and then something like this happened, reminding me that every effort was worth it. I'm grateful for the chance to impact lives and continue my journey in this incredible field.



REDISCOVERING THE LOST DISCIPLINE IN DENTISTRY: THE INTEGRAL PATIENT AND PRACTICE JOURNEY

By Billie Prisby

Photography by Darlene Alderson

In the ever-evolving landscape of dentistry, the focus has shifted significantly over the years. Once, the profession was grounded in a discipline that emphasized the patient and practice journey, a concept championed by thought leaders like Sally McKenzie and Cathy Jameson. Their teachings underscored the importance of creating a holistic experience for patients, blending clinical excellence with exceptional service—a philosophy that today seems to have lost its luster in the dental educational circuit and, as a byproduct, has lost its way in dental practices.

The Historical Context

For decades, dental practices were not just focused on clinical skills but also on practice management and patient interaction. Many Continuing Education (CE) events provided comprehensive training that resembled a college curriculum, covering everything from effective practice management to delivering care with the finesse of a Ritz-Carlton experience. These events fostered a community where dental professionals learned together, emphasizing that kindness costs nothing and that creating value was essential to both patient satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

Practices that embraced this philosophy often saw tangible benefits. As noted in the American Dental Association's (ADA) reports, practices that prioritized patient relationships and staff engagement experienced lower burnout rates and higher job satisfaction among their teams (ADA, 2021). Dr. Eric Dyer and Dr. Lisa Wilkins, in their comprehensive review on burnout in dentistry, stated, "A strong connection to patient care directly correlates with job satisfaction and reduces feelings of burnout" (Dyer & Wilkins, 2020).

Crucially, what made these courses effective was that the entire team attended together, regardless of their job descriptions. This approach ensured that everyone had a full understanding of each team member's role and the specific needs of patients. As highlighted in *Creating a Patient-Centric Culture in Your Dental Practice*, Dr. Ronald Glickman noted, "When teams engage in training together, it fosters an environment of collaboration, excitement, fun, and, most importantly, fulfillment" (Glickman & Glickman, 2019). This holistic approach not only improved patient retention but also enhanced the overall quality of care.

The Essential Components of the Patient and Practice Journey

Practice Management and Insurance: Training sessions covered vital topics like financial management, team dynamics, and operational efficiency, including navigating insurance processes. These elements were not merely administrative but were crucial for creating a supportive environment for both staff and patients. The focus was on creating a practice that felt inviting and professional.

Patient Care: The emphasis on treating patients with respect and empathy transformed the dental experience. A standout example was the Full Mouth Synergy course, which offered an in-depth, hands-on experience with industry leaders like Dr. David Hornbrook. This course allowed dental teams to work chair-side with phenomenal dentists and laboratories, deepening their understanding of comprehensive care. Dr. Hornbrook emphasized that "a well-rounded education in full mouth reconstruction can completely transform a practice and benefit patient outcomes" (Hornbrook, 2022). This patient-centered model led to a deeper connection between dental professionals and their patients.



Creating Value: Professionals learned to articulate their value to patients and to demand fair compensation that reflected their skills and the quality of care they provided. Kirk Bernhardt from ACT Dental emphasizes, "Value is not just about what you do; it's about how you communicate that value to your patients and make them feel understood and cared for." He adds, "When patients perceive value, they're more likely to accept treatment recommendations and return for care, which ultimately benefits the practice" (Bernhardt, 2022).

Additionally, creating value can also involve simple, thoughtful touches that enhance the patient experience. For instance, offering amenities like a coffee bar in the reception area, goodie bags, paraffin hand wax treatments, chair massagers, and cozy blankets not only differentiates a practice from competitors but also enriches the patient experience. As noted by dental consultant Dr. Michelle Strange, "These small gestures show patients that you care about their comfort and well-being, giving your practice a unique identity and purpose" (Strange, 2021). This empowerment fosters a sense of ownership and pride among dental teams, leading to better job satisfaction.

Team Cohesion: The collective attendance at events created a culture of unity within dental practices. Professionals shared experiences and learned from one another, creating a network of support.

Kathy Jameson underscores the significance of this cohesion, stating, "When a dental team works together seamlessly, they not only enhance the patient experience but also elevate their own job satisfaction and fulfillment" (Jameson, 2021). This camaraderie played a significant role in minimizing burnout and enhancing workplace joy, as it fosters an environment where everyone feels valued and invested in the practice's success.

The Decline of the Discipline

Despite the benefits of this integrated approach, the dental community has drifted away from these practices in several ways.

Increased Focus on Productivity: The emphasis on metrics and efficiency is even stronger now than ever, often overshadowing the foundational principles of patient care and staff well-being.

This focus prioritizes output over the people behind those numbers, creating a disconnect that can lead to dissatisfaction and burnout among dental professionals. As highlighted by the ADA, "When practices prioritize productivity without considering the well-being of their teams, they risk losing the very essence of patient care" (ADA, 2021).

Disconnection from Patient-Centered Care: Many practices have shifted away from the holistic care model that fosters meaningful relationships, leading to a transactional approach to dentistry. This shift has manifested in several notable ways:

Reduced Interaction Time: Many dental practices have adopted time-efficient protocols that limit the amount of time dental professionals spend with each patient. According to a study published in *The Journal of the American Dental Association*, "The average patient interaction time has decreased significantly, leading to a lack of personal connection and a focus on clinical tasks rather than patient needs" (JADA, 2020).

Standardized Treatment Plans: The move towards standardized treatment protocols can often overlook individual patient circumstances and preferences. As noted by Dr. Michael Apa, a prominent cosmetic dentist, "While efficiency is essential, it's equally important to tailor treatment plans to the unique needs of each patient, fostering trust and satisfaction" (Apa, 2021).

Limited Follow-Up Care: Practices increasingly prioritize immediate outcomes over long-term patient relationships, leading to inadequate follow-up care. Dr. Jennifer Bell, in her article on patient retention, stated, "Without effective follow-up, practices miss the opportunity to build long-lasting relationships that enhance patient loyalty and overall satisfaction" (Bell, 2021).

Burnout and Job Dissatisfaction: As the connection to patient care diminishes, dental professionals report higher levels of burnout and job dissatisfaction, impacting their enthusiasm and commitment to the field. A study published in *The Journal of the American Dental Association* found that practices that disengage from patient-centered care report higher levels of staff turnover and dissatisfaction (JADA, 2022). As noted by Dyer and Wilkins, "Burnout is often a reflection of the disconnection between a dentist's values and the operational demands of the practice" (Dyer & Wilkins, 2020).

Reclaiming the Discipline

To reclaim this lost discipline, dental professionals must revisit a collaborative, all-hands-on-deck, department-wide approach, integrating the teachings of pioneers like ACT Dental, McKenzie, and Jameson into modern practice. The days of not having everyone cross-trained, or at least understanding what's happening in each department and why, should be addressed immediately. Without taking a comprehensive approach, the dental community will continue to face staffing issues along with high churn rates of patients in their practices. By focusing on the patient-practice journey and where they intersect, and emphasizing the importance of kindness, empathy, and value creation, practices can create an environment that not only enhances patient care but also enriches the lives of those who provide it.

The future of dentistry hinges on the ability to blend clinical expertise with exceptional patient care. By fostering a culture that values the patient-practice journey, dental professionals can reduce burnout, increase job satisfaction, and ultimately provide the highest level of care to their patients.

In conclusion, by revitalizing the integral patient-practice journey, the dental community can not only enhance the quality of care but also restore the joy and fulfillment that comes from this noble profession.



Heather Bolton

MBA, BASC, BSDH, RDH, FADHA

HEATHER BOLTON, MBA, BASC, BSDH, FADHA, IS THE CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF YOGATEETH AND THE HOST OF THE YOGATEETHPODCAST, RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE TOP FIVE DENTAL PODCASTS BY JOANNA HUGHES. A PASSIONATE LEADER, SHE SERVED AS SADHA SECRETARY IN DENTAL HYGIENE SCHOOL, WHERE SHE WAS HONORED AS "MOST LIKELY TO BE THE NEXT ESTHER WILKINS."

HER ACCOLADES INCLUDE THE PIRA HONOREE AWARD, THE THREE MISSION AWARD, FELLOW ADHA STATUS, AND TWO DENOBI AWARD NOMINATIONS. SHE ALSO EARNED THE EXCELLENCE CAPSTONE AWARD DURING HER MBA AND HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED AS AN AMERICORPS SERVICE SCHOLAR AND PEOPLE TO PEOPLE STUDENT AMBASSADOR.

HEATHER IS A DEDICATED HUMANITARIAN, VOLUNTEERING AT A LOCAL CLINIC THAT PROVIDES FREE CARE TO HOMELESS AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES. SHE HAS ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO A HEALTH INITIATIVE IN GHANA. THROUGH YOGATEETH, SHE PROMOTES MINDFULNESS PRACTICES FOR DENTAL PROFESSIONALS. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF THE FIRST MINDFULNESS-GUIDED JOURNAL FOR DENTAL HYGIENISTS, A DENTAL-THEMED ADULT COLORING BOOK, AND SEVERAL IMPACTFUL ARTICLES. AS A SPEAKER AND ADVOCATE, HEATHER INSPIRES DENTAL PROFESSIONALS TO PRIORITIZE WELL-BEING AND POSITIVELY IMPACT THEIR COMMUNITIES.

Heather, RDH

HEATHER BOLTON

My passion for dental hygiene began with a compassionate new hygienist at my childhood dental office. During a difficult time, his personalized care and attention made me feel safe and valued. He remembered small details, like my toothbrush color preference, and genuinely made a difference in my life.

His story of starting dental hygiene school later in life inspired me to pursue the field as a single mom. Shadowing him and learning from his dedication deepened my commitment. He described the hygienist's role as a mix of "detective, therapist, artist, and photographer"—an approach that still drives my passion today. His kindness shaped my approach to care, where I prioritize making every patient feel respected and valued. Whether it's offering comfort or simply listening, I strive to create a compassionate environment where patients feel truly cared for.

Volunteering at a local clinic for homeless and low-income families has been both an honor and a transformative experience. Through outreach, education, and compassionate care, I empower individuals by connecting them to resources and promoting healthier lives.

Helping families access critical dental care and guiding patients toward preventative services is deeply rewarding. This work honors my late grandfather's legacy of empathy and service, fueling my passion for creating meaningful change in underserved communities.

Professional development is essential to my growth. I stay current through CE conferences, emerging technologies like AI and 3D scanners, and earning certifications, including my MBA in 2023.

These efforts help refine communication, personalize care, and introduce innovation. I educate patients about the connection between oral health and overall wellness, building trust and encouraging better habits.

Collaboration and networking fuel my passion for dental hygiene. Through my podcast, I connect with inspiring professionals who share stories of resilience, motivating my listeners and highlighting the importance of compassion in care. Engaging with colleagues and specialists strengthens my commitment to making a meaningful difference in the dental community.

Mentorship has also inspired me to support others. As a UDHA delegate, I advocate for my peers and empower aspiring students to reach their goals. Advocacy is about giving others the confidence and support to succeed. A powerful moment came when a patient transformed her health through improved oral care and thanked me for changing her life. This experience reinforced the importance of advocacy and mentorship.

My passion for advocacy extends to speaking at a dental hygiene college, championing my profession through my podcast, and contributing to the ThatDeafRDH Foundation's mission of inclusion. I am committed to enhancing patient care and quality of life.

I am truly honored to be shortlisted alongside such inspiring dental hygienists and professionals for the prestigious Denobi Award. This recognition celebrates individuals who make a meaningful difference in their communities and in the lives of their patients. Being part of this incredible group is both humbling and deeply motivating.

It allows me to reflect on the journey that brought me here—the challenges, the growth, and the passion that fuels my commitment to the dental hygiene profession. I remain dedicated to making unique contributions to both the field and my community.

This nomination reinforces my drive to continue advancing clinical care, promoting community well-being, supporting professional development, and fostering collaboration and leadership in our profession. Thank you for this incredible opportunity to celebrate the impact we can create together. We are changing the world one smile at a time!

HOW TRAUMA TRIGGERS DENTAL ANXIETY

By Heather Bolton
Photography by Tima Miroshnichenko

We Need to Realize That Not All Dental Anxiety Originates from Past Dental Experiences

This article contains content that may be triggering for some readers. Please take care while reading, and consider your emotional well-being. If you or someone you know is affected by the topics discussed, support resources are available.

Moment of Clarity

While I was living in California as a Dental Hygienist, I quickly became friends with a quirky girl named Chloe (name has been changed for privacy). As we began getting to know one another, she learned that I was a Dental Hygienist who loved yoga. I shared how I find satisfaction in assisting patients who struggle with dental anxiety by doing my best to make them feel as comfortable as possible while providing the best standard of care.

What happened next was a paradigm shift that would alter how I viewed dental anxiety as I knew it. Chloe explained that she had severe dental anxiety, not only because of her past negative dental treatments but also because of past sexual abuse in a non-dental setting. Now that I had a realization, I wondered—what else may I not understand, and how could I help?

Triggers

Dental anxiety is on a spectrum and could be anywhere from mild to severe. It is vital to understand our patients' level of comfort so we may be compassionate towards them during treatment and possibly improve their current and future experiences.

According to the Journal of Dental Hygiene, White et al. (2017) explain that dental anxiety is “characterized by a physical and/or emotional response to a perceived threat.” Dental anxiety can be caused by many reasons, such as but not limited to:

- Fear of pain (Armfield, J. M., 2010)
- Loss of control or helplessness (Klages, et al., 2004)
- Previous traumatic childhood dental experiences (Liddell & Locker, 1997)
- Embarrassment or shame (Newton & Buck, 2000)
- Sensory triggers (Kleinknecht et al., 1973)



Past trauma, including sexual abuse, can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or panic attacks during dental treatment for a variety of reasons. A few possible causes include:

- Loss of control and vulnerability (Willumsen, 2004)
- Triggers and flashbacks (Willumsen, 2001)
- Violation of personal boundaries (Coles & Jones, 2009)
- Shame and body image issues (Walker et al., 1995)

During dental treatment, patients are extremely vulnerable. Lying on their backs in a patient chair, they experience sharp instruments, needles, drills, and other invasive tools. This setup can trigger flashbacks of previous trauma, such as unwanted anatomical body parts violating personal boundaries. Sensory triggers may also contribute, such as the smell of latex. Shame and body image issues can make the dental visit extremely uncomfortable, especially if trauma-related evidence exists in the oral cavity.

Prevalence

According to Kamin (2006), between 50% to 80% of adults in the United States have some form of dental anxiety ranging from mild to severe. However, 19% of the sample reported moderate to high dental anxiety (White et al., 2017).

Current data demonstrates that 1 in 9 girls and 1 in 20 boys under the age of 18 have experienced some form of sexual abuse or assault (Finkelhor et al., 2014). The Bureau of Justice Studies, Sexual Assault of Young Children (2000) reported that victims of sexual abuse are four times more likely to develop PTSD symptoms as adults. It is important to realize that these statistics are based on reported cases, meaning the actual prevalence may be much higher.

The Impact

The impact of dental anxiety not only affects patients' emotional well-being but also their lifelong oral health. Anxiety may cause patients to:

- Avoid consistent visits to their dental hygienists
- Postpone necessary dental treatment
- Completely avoid dental visits

This can lead to worsening conditions such as caries requiring root canals, emergency extractions, or periodontal disease. Ironically, postponing treatment and regular cleanings can create further dental anxiety due to increased discomfort that could have been avoided.

Dental fear not only affects patients but also dental professionals. For example, I once treated a young female patient who shed tears just from seeing an ultrasonic scaler—before it even entered her mouth. Another male patient in his twenties visibly flinched at the sight of a dental mirror during an exam.

While these cases are rare, when they do occur, they can make it more challenging to provide the standard of care. For the young female patient, I used hand instruments instead of an ultrasonic scaler to complete her prophylaxis at a slower pace. The male patient was rescheduled for another day and provided nitrous oxide for anxiety relief.

Dental anxiety can affect our emotional health, production efficiency, and relationships with coworkers.

Action

As dental professionals, it is vital that we take action by being aware of patients' body language and comfort levels to provide the best standard of care. Strategies include:

- Building a trusting relationship (Armfield, 2010)
- Providing clear communication (Newton & Buck, 2000)
- Using relaxation techniques (Jones & Simmons, 2015)
- Creating a calming environment (Thompson & Erichsen, 2013)
- Allowing patients control and choice (Kleinknecht et al., 2001)

Some patients may also benefit from home visits or teledentistry, where they feel more comfortable.

Building rapport can be as simple as:

- Offering a warm smile
- Engaging in small talk before treatment
- Listening to their concerns

Before beginning a prophylaxis, I explain each step in advance so there are no surprises. Many patients relax simply from knowing what to expect. Offering simple choices, such as flavor options for polish or fluoride, can also empower them.

For example, I say:

"I'm about to polish your teeth. It might feel a little grainy or ticklish, but I'll rinse you thoroughly afterward. If you need a break at any point, just raise your left arm. Your comfort is my priority."

When I first started saying phrases like "Your comfort is my priority" or "It is an honor that you trust me today", I felt a little awkward. However, I noticed a shift in patients—they often expressed gratitude.

I also incorporate relaxation techniques, such as:

- Encouraging deep breathing
- Providing sunglasses, blankets, or neck pillows
- Suggesting meditation or headphones to block out office noise

Since each patient has unique needs, I make sure to read the room. Some prefer minimal conversation, while others share their life stories.



A simple statement like “I appreciate you being vulnerable with me about your dental anxiety; this helps me help you.” or “Is there anything I can do to make you feel more comfortable today?” can make a significant difference.

Now, it’s your turn—embrace these ideas or develop your own strategies to help patients feel at ease.

Understanding dental anxiety not only helps our patients but also allows us to succeed as dental professionals.



Jasdeep Kaur Cheema

BDS, DDS, FPFA

GROWING UP IN THE HOLY CITY OF AMRITSAR, PUNJAB, INDIA, AND SEEING MY FATHER SELFLESSLY SERVING HUMANITY EVERY DAY, I WAS INSTILLED WITH VALUES OF COMPASSION, EMPATHY, AND SERVICE TO HUMANITY. MY PATERNAL UNCLE IS A DENTIST AND HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY INSPIRATION. I GREW UP WATCHING HIM, I ADMIRER HOW HE HELPED PEOPLE IN PAIN AND ON THEIR JOURNEY TOWARDS BEAUTIFUL SMILE, HIS EXPERTISE AND KINDNESS SPARKED A PASSION WITHIN ME. AS A CHILD, I CAME ACROSS A POOR YOUNG LADY WHO HELPED MY MOM AT HOME, SHE WOULD NEVER SMILE. ONE DAY MY MOM ASKED HER THE REASON. SHE WAS HESITANT IN BEGINNING BUT LATER OPENED UP. SHE SAID SHE HAS UGLY TEETH, AND EVERYONE MAKES FUN OF HER, NO GUY WANTS TO MARRY HER. I WAS CONFUSED, HOW A LITTLE THING CAN AFFECT LIFE SO MUCH. I TALKED TO MY UNCLE; HE TOOK CARE OF HER TEETH AT NO COST. IN FRONT OF MY EYES, I SAW SOMEONE'S LIFE CHANGING. SHE IS A HAPPILY MARRIED WOMEN NOW AND ALWAYS THANKFUL TO MY FAMILY. THIS WAS THE TURNING POINT IN MY LIFE, THAT WAS FIRST TIME I REALIZED HOW A SMILE IS A CURVE WHICH CAN STRAIGHTEN EVERYTHING IN LIFE. THAT WAS THE BEGINNING OF MY JOURNEY, THE JOURNEY OF BECOMING A DENTIST.



JASDEEP KAUR CHEEMA

After years of hard work and dedication, the day arrived in year 2012 I got into dental school where my uncle graduated in India. Throughout my academic journey, I excelled in dental school, earning numerous awards and honors, I graduated in the year 2017 and started working and continued my research journey and volunteer work. I was recognized for my research work, including a study on radiographic projections in undergraduate dental students and an assessment of lip prints of patients with oral pre-malignant lesions. In 2019 I was selected by PTH Summit to receive awards for Excellence in Dental Research. In the same year I also got in a very competitive International dental Program at University of the Pacific Arthur A Dugani School of Dentistry which I started in 2021 because of covid travel restrictions from India.

Helping others has always been an integral part of my life. In high school, I helped children from poor families in study. In dental school, I organized various free dental camps for underprivileged kids. I also joined many organizations to help poor and needy, some of them are Globasikh, Ecosikh, feeding India and Khalsa aid. In 2020 I was awarded for excellence in social welfare services by Global outreach Dental Awards. I continue my community work while my visit in the United States. I volunteered in Sikh temple, health wellness events in some public schools, American Red cross, Mount Hope church closet for underprivileged, WISH group by Wisconsin Police Department to support women suffering from domestic violence, various events held in Hometown hospice and American heart association and also attended an event to understand special kids better. I give dental health awareness seminars for old age homes to explain the relation of dental health to systemic health. By God's grace I will continue doing this in future.

Some of the other awards I received were Young Dental Achiever of the year in 2021 and Excellence in the field of General Dentistry in 2022. I also got Awarded for my research project on Implants abutment screw loosening by OKU Senior Excellence Award in 2023. I started Working as a dentist in United States in 2023. I also got nominated by the top 100 doc to be in their 2023 class. As I progressed in my career, I took on leadership roles, including serving as an Associate Member of the Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors (ASTDD). I'm also a Committee Member of the School and Adolescent Committee and the Healthy Aging Committee within ASTDD. I also serve as a membership development committee representative for the Wisconsin Dental Association.

I love sharing my knowledge and expertise and have given various international lectures mostly on implants. Currently I am working as an Implant Restorative Dentist at Nuvia Dental Implant Center, making life-changing contributions to the lives of my patients.

In 2024, I was inducted as a Fellow of the Pierre Fauchard Academy (PFA), recognizing my contributions to the dental profession. This honor was a testament to my dedication to delivering exceptional patient care and promoting excellence in dental research and practice. As an Editorial Board Member and Reviewer for several journals, I've had the opportunity to share my expertise and promote excellence in dental research and practice.

Being shortlisted for the Denobi Awards is an incredible honor, validating my hard work, dedication, and passion for delivering exceptional patient care. This recognition motivates me to continue pushing boundaries and making a positive impact on the lives of my patients and the community.

As I reflect on my journey, I'm reminded of the Sikh values that have guided me: compassion, empathy, and selfless service. I strive to embody these principles in my personal and professional life, inspiring others to do the same.



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS IN SUCCESSFUL DENTAL TREATMENT PLANNING AND OUTCOMES

By Jasdeep Kaur Cheema
Photography by Tima Miroshnichenko

Communication is the backbone of any successful dental treatment. Setting realistic expectations through clear and open communication ensures that patients understand what to expect before, during, and after treatment. This includes addressing all possible questions and concerns.

I personally believe in the concept of "under-promising and over-delivering." It starts with clearly explaining what patients should expect from us and what we, as dental professionals, expect from them. In this article, we will explore the importance of setting realistic expectations, particularly in advanced treatments such as full-mouth rehabilitation with All-on-X implants.

Why Setting Expectations Is Important

Establishing clear expectations before beginning any treatment has several advantages:

- Empowering Patients to Make Informed Decisions – Providing patients with a thorough understanding of the treatment process, potential outcomes, associated risks, and post-treatment expectations allows them to make informed choices that suit their needs.
- Managing Anxiety and Stress – Knowing what will happen at each stage of treatment helps reduce dental anxiety. When patients are well-prepared for what to expect before, during, and after a procedure, they are less likely to feel overwhelmed or frightened.

- Building Trust and Rapport – Open and transparent communication fosters trust between patients and dental professionals. Trust is essential for successful treatment outcomes, as patients are more likely to follow recommendations and feel confident in their care.

Challenges of Full-Mouth Rehabilitation with All-on-X Implants

Full-mouth rehabilitation using All-on-X implants is a life-changing procedure. It involves replacing an entire dental arch with a fixed prosthesis supported by four or more dental implants. This treatment has transformed the lives of edentulous patients by significantly improving function, aesthetics, and overall quality of life.

However, due to its complexity, full-mouth rehabilitation requires careful planning, precise execution, and thorough patient education. Setting realistic expectations is essential to ensuring patient satisfaction. Key factors that patients need to be aware of include:

- Treatment Duration and Stages – Patients must understand that the process involves multiple phases and that unexpected factors, such as anatomical or systemic conditions, can affect timelines.
- Surgical Components – Patients should be informed about what to expect on the day of surgery, including anesthesia, discomfort, and post-surgical care.

- Risks and Benefits – Educating patients about both the advantages and potential complications of the procedure is critical for informed consent.

- Prosthetic Components – Patients should understand the structure, material, and functionality of their prosthetic teeth.

- Prioritizing Function Over Aesthetics – Functionality is the primary goal of treatment, and patients should be prepared for this focus.

- Aesthetic Expectations – While All-on-X implants significantly improve appearance, they may not replicate the exact look of natural teeth, and patients must have realistic aesthetic expectations.

- Pain Management and Recovery – Patients need clear guidelines on pain control, swelling management, and healing timelines.

- Cost and Insurance – Transparency about costs, potential additional expenses, and insurance coverage helps avoid financial surprises.

- Post-Operative Hygiene Expectations – Proper maintenance is crucial for long-term success, and patients must commit to an effective oral hygiene routine.

- Dietary Restrictions During Healing – Patients should be aware of dietary limitations to support healing and implant integration.

- Healing Phases and Possible Complications – Patients need to understand that healing is a gradual process and that unexpected issues may arise



Best Practices for Establishing Realistic Expectations

To effectively establish realistic expectations, dental professionals should:

- **Communicate Clearly and Simply** – Use straightforward language to explain each aspect of the treatment process.
- **Utilize Visual Aids and Multimedia** – Diagrams, videos, and digital simulations can help patients better grasp complex concepts.
- **Encourage Questions and Problem-Solving** – Addressing patient concerns openly ensures they feel heard and understood.
- **Provide Written and Verbal Instructions** – Since there is a lot for patients to absorb, reinforcing information through written materials helps them retain important details.

Psychological Benefits of Setting Realistic Expectations

When patients have clear expectations, their psychological well-being is positively impacted in several ways:

- **Reduced Anxiety and Fear** – Knowing what to expect alleviates uncertainty and fear.
- **Increased Confidence in Treatment** – Understanding the process and potential outcomes fosters trust in the dental team.
- **Greater Satisfaction with Results** – Patients who have realistic expectations are more likely to be pleased with their final outcomes.
- **Stronger Compliance with Post-Treatment Care** – When patients understand the importance of follow-up care, they are more likely to adhere to hygiene and dietary recommendations.

Establishing realistic expectations is a critical component of successful dental treatment planning, especially for complex procedures like full-mouth rehabilitation with All-on-X implants. By educating patients about the treatment process, expected results, potential risks, and necessary post-operative care, dental professionals can build trust, reduce anxiety, and improve patient satisfaction.

Setting the right expectations ensures that patients are prepared for their journey, leading to better treatment adherence and ultimately, successful outcomes. Clear communication and education empower patients, making them active participants in their dental care and enhancing their overall experience.



Tiffany Wuebben

RDH, FOUNDER & CEO
THE HYGIENEPRENEUR

LIFE IS FULL OF UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES, AND THROUGH THOSE CHALLENGES, WE OFTEN FIND OUR PURPOSE AND STRENGTH. MY JOURNEY AS A DENTAL HYGIENIST, PAIRED WITH MY EVOLUTION INTO AN ENTREPRENEUR, HAS BEEN A TESTAMENT TO RESILIENCE, PASSION, AND A COMMITMENT TO MEANINGFUL CHANGE. I PROUDLY EMBRACE THE IDENTITY OF "THE HYGIENEPRENEUR", A ROLE THAT HAS ALLOWED ME TO EMPOWER DENTAL PROFESSIONALS, TRANSFORM PRACTICES, AND INSPIRE GROWTH.

NOW, AS A 2025 DENOBI SHORTLISTER, I FEEL PRIVILEGED TO SHARE MY STORY AS PART OF DENTE MAGAZINE'S SPECIAL EDITION. THIS RECOGNITION IS NOT JUST A PERSONAL MILESTONE BUT A CELEBRATION OF THE JOURNEY THAT LED ME HERE—A JOURNEY SHAPED BY CHALLENGES, PERSEVERANCE, AND AN UNWAVERING DEDICATION TO THE DENTAL PROFESSION.

TIFFANY WUEBBEN

Where I stand today is far from where I started. My path was filled with twists, challenges, and invaluable lessons that shaped my vision and approach to dentistry. Early in my career, I worked with an inspiring dentist who entrusted me to manage his thriving practice while I pursued full-time studies. This experience gave me an inside look at the operational, clinical, and cultural aspects of dentistry—fueling my drive to explore its full potential.

Becoming a dental hygienist was a purposeful choice. It provided me with a stable career while raising two young children as a single mother. Juggling work, school, and parenthood was demanding, but I persevered, knowing that I was building a future for my family. This career empowered me financially, personally, and professionally while deepening my desire to give back and make a broader impact.

As I advanced in my career, I realized that dentistry extends far beyond clinical care. My passion led me to consulting and coaching, where I help dental professionals streamline workflows, enhance patient care, and build thriving, successful practices. I don't just advise—I integrate myself into practices, working alongside teams to turn their visions into reality.

A thriving dental practice is more than a business—it's a place where patients feel valued, teams work cohesively, and owners rediscover their joy for the profession. I help practices achieve this through practical systems, leadership development, and strategic collaboration.

Hygienists, in particular, have the power to be more than caregivers. They can become educators, patient advocates, and practice leaders. My mission is to unlock this potential by fostering cultures of trust, empowering teams, and developing strong leadership within dental practices. Through my work, I help professionals see that profitability and fulfillment are not mutually exclusive—they can coexist and thrive together.

Beyond my consulting work, I am passionate about education and writing. I authored [Hygienepreneur: The Dental Hygienist's Guide to Achieving Career Success & Personal Transformation](#), a guide designed to inspire dental hygienists to take control of their careers and unlock their full potential. Additionally, I co-authored [Culture Catalyst: Your Competitive Edge for Unleashing Unprecedented Company Growth & Fostering High-Performing, Engaged Teams](#), which provides actionable strategies for creating empowered, high-functioning workplaces.

Being named a 2025 Denobi Shortlister is an honor that fills me with immense gratitude. To be recognized among so many dedicated and talented professionals is deeply humbling. This acknowledgment is not just about me—it's a tribute to the mentors, colleagues, and dental teams who have supported and inspired me along the way.

The Denobi Awards are more than just recognition—they represent a celebration of the compassion, innovation, and dedication that drive our profession forward. This honor deepens my commitment to empowering dental professionals, enhancing patient care, and fostering collaboration to create meaningful transformation.

This is just the beginning. My mission as a dental professional, educator, author, and industry leader continues to evolve. Every day, I strive to help dentists and their teams reduce stress, elevate patient care, and build practices that are both fulfilling and financially successful.

To everyone reading this—whether you're a dreamer, a leader, or a professional ready to rise above challenges—know that success is within your reach. It starts with one step, and I am here to walk alongside you as we shape the future of dentistry together.

For speaking availability or to explore strategies to optimize your dental practice, visit thehygienepreneur.com or reach out to Tiffany at tiffany@thehygienepreneur.com.



Sarah Crow

RDH, SENIOR EXECUTIVE CONSULTANT
CELLERANT CONSULTING GROUP

SARAH CROW BEGAN HER JOURNEY IN THE DENTAL INDUSTRY IN 2004, BUILDING A CAREER DISTINGUISHED BY EXCELLENCE, LEADERSHIP, AND A PASSION FOR ADVANCING DENTAL HYGIENE. THROUGHOUT HER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY, SHE HAS RECEIVED NUMEROUS AWARDS RECOGNIZING HER DEDICATION AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD.

AMONG HER MANY ACHIEVEMENTS, SARAH WAS HONORED AS THE 2021 MASSACHUSETTS DENTAL SOCIETY HYGIENIST OF THE YEAR AND WAS MOST RECENTLY NAMED THE 2024 RESEARCH HYGIENIST OF THE YEAR BY THE MASSACHUSETTS DENTAL HYGIENISTS' ASSOCIATION. THESE ACCOLADES REFLECT HER UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO INNOVATION, PATIENT CARE, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

SARAH CROW

Sarah has played an integral role in shaping the dental hygiene profession, serving as a Past President of the Massachusetts Dental Hygienists' Association. Her leadership has helped drive progress within the organization and support fellow dental professionals in advancing their careers.

In addition to her work in leadership, she is a Senior Executive Consultant for Cellerant Consulting Group, where she collaborates with industry experts to improve dental technologies and patient care solutions. Her expertise and guidance help shape the future of dental hygiene by connecting professionals with cutting-edge innovations.

Sarah's passion for education extends to her role as a USA Trainer for the Swiss Dental Academy. Specializing in Guided Biofilm Therapy with EMS Dental, she provides hands-on training to dental professionals, equipping them with the latest techniques and tools to enhance patient care.

She regularly presents educational content both virtually and in person to dental professionals across the country. Her ability to share knowledge and mentor others has made her a sought-after speaker, inspiring her peers to adopt evidence-based practices and improve clinical outcomes.

Despite her many roles in leadership, consulting, and education, Sarah remains deeply connected to clinical practice. She continues to work chairside with patients in Salem, MA, where she brings her passion for oral health to life. Through personalized patient care, she helps individuals improve both their oral and overall health, reinforcing the importance of prevention and education.

Sarah Crow's dedication to the dental profession is evident in every aspect of her career. Whether mentoring fellow hygienists, leading industry initiatives, or providing exceptional patient care, she remains committed to elevating the field of dental hygiene.

Elaine Bylis

DDS

DR. ELAINE BYLIS HAS DEDICATED HER CAREER TO PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF ESTHETIC AND RESTORATIVE DENTISTRY, SEAMLESSLY BLENDING ARTISTRY WITH CUTTING-EDGE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY. PRACTICING ALONGSIDE HER FATHER IN GLEN BURNIE, MARYLAND, SHE HAS BUILT A REPUTATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN ANTERIOR COMPOSITE ARTISTRY, DIGITAL SMILE DESIGN, AND IMPLANT SURGICAL PLANNING.



ELAINE BYLIS

Contributions & Achievements

Her passion for dentistry began with an appreciation for the transformative power of a confident smile. This drive led her to pursue advanced training at the Nash Institute, where she later returned as a guest lecturer. She has since shared her expertise at numerous conferences and webinars, including the Massachusetts District Dental Society, the Ohio Dental Association, and the Ross Nash Continuum. Additionally, her published works in *Dentistry Today*, *Incisal Edge*, and *DentalTown* have further solidified her influence in the field.

Industry Involvement & Recognition

Beyond her clinical and academic contributions, Dr. Bylis is committed to mentorship and industry advancement.

She hosted *Flossy Ladies*, a podcast series highlighting women in dentistry, and actively participates in organizations such as the Seattle Study Club, the International Academy for Dental-Facial Esthetics, and the American Academy of Clear Aligners. Her dedication has earned her numerous accolades, including being named one of *Incisal Edge*'s 40 Under 40 and becoming a top finalist in the Seattle Study Club's Best Case Wins competition.

Being shortlisted for the Denobi Award is a profound honor for Dr. Bylis, as it reflects her unwavering commitment to innovation, education, and community impact in the dental industry. She remains driven to inspire the next generation of dental professionals while continuously refining her craft to provide exceptional patient care.

Dora Pena Pesqueda

FOUNDER, CEO, PRESIDENT

MY JOURNEY IN THE DENTAL FIELD BEGAN IN HIGH SCHOOL WHEN I DISCOVERED MY PASSION FOR DENTISTRY. ALTHOUGH I HADN'T BEEN TO THE DENTIST MUCH BEFORE THEN, MY EXPERIENCE LEFT A LASTING IMPRESSION ON ME. I WAS DRAWN TO THE SMALL BUT MEANINGFUL ACT OF TAKING CARE OF MY HEALTH, THE CARE I RECEIVED FROM DENTAL PROFESSIONALS, AND THE UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT OF A DENTAL OFFICE—THE SMELLS, THE SCRUBS, AND THE SENSE OF PURPOSE. THIS EARLY EXPERIENCE SPARKED MY DESIRE TO PURSUE A CAREER WHERE I COULD CARE FOR OTHERS IN A SIMILAR WAY. OVER THE YEARS, MY CAREER EVOLVED FROM A STERILE TECH AND DENTAL ASSISTANT TO MANAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS. MY EXPERIENCE CO-OWNING DENTAL PRACTICES PROVIDED INVALUABLE INSIGHTS INTO PATIENT CARE, DENTAL PRACTICE DESIGN, AND BUILDING STRONG DENTAL TEAMS. SINCE 1999, I HAVE DEDICATED MYSELF TO LEARNING AND GROWING IN THE FIELD, AND THAT KNOWLEDGE HAS ALLOWED ME TO SERVE AS THE PRESIDENT AND CEO OF A MOBILE DENTAL ORGANIZATION, THESMILEZONE.



DORA PENA PESQUEDA

The turning point in my career came in 2019 when I was promoting a dental office in Texas and collaborating with school nurses, administrators, and parents. I encountered a significant barrier: many families struggled to access dental care due to the demands of work and school schedules. One conversation with a teacher, who was unable to take her daughter to the dentist because of her role as the sole provider for her family, deeply impacted me. This conversation sparked an idea—what if I could bring dental care directly to the schools? From that conversation, TheSmileZone was born.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further accelerated the development of TheSmileZone, and since then, it has been my privilege to lead a passionate team dedicated to providing accessible care to children and families across Texas and, as of June 2023, across Arizona. This journey has been both fulfilling and therapeutic, and it has reinforced my commitment to this work.

What started as a vision has grown into something truly special. I am proud to lead an incredible team.

Raymond Pesqueda, Vice President and Executive Assistant, has played a pivotal role in our success by managing systems and communicating effectively with our team and volunteers. Alyssa Apodaca, our Director of Operations, has expanded our reach through her expertise and dedication. Mariah Taylor, our RDHAP, and Jacob de Werd, another RDHAP, have both shown deep commitment to our outreach programs, while Rachel Schimpa, our Dental Assistant, brings a willingness to learn and grow that has been invaluable.

We are also incredibly grateful for the continued support from Miah Pesqueda, Justin Pesqueda, Isaiah Apodaca, Ezekiel Pena, Celeste Fleming, Anissa Cabanillas, and Dr. Troy Richins, who, though limited on time, have contributed countless hours to our mission. Their dedication has been essential to our success.

Lastly, Dr. Nikita Kuppanda, our Pediatric Dentist, has been a longtime partner in the mobile dental space, offering exceptional care to the children and families we serve. Together, our team's diverse skills and shared vision are making a lasting impact on our community and the dental industry.

Being shortlisted for recognition is an honor that has humbled me deeply. I have spent much of my career behind the scenes, allowing others to take the spotlight. While I've always known my value and the contributions I've made, this recognition serves as a reminder that anything is possible, no matter your title or position. If you dream big and take ownership of your vision, great things can happen.

I am particularly proud to be shortlisted not just as an individual, but as part of a team. None of this would be possible without the incredible support from my family, friends, and the amazing individuals who work alongside me. The encouragement I've received from them has played a pivotal role in helping me get here, and now, I am truly grateful and honored to be in this position.



Mandy McGill

RDHP, FOUNDER AND CEO OF WORLD HEALTH OUTREACH ASSOCIATION.

MANDY IS A TRAILBLAZING PUBLIC HEALTH LEADER WHO UTILIZES COLLABORATIVE AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO ENHANCE ORAL HEALTH ON A GLOBAL SCALE. THROUGH INNOVATIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS, SHE EMPOWERS ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES BY DESIGNING TAILORED INTERVENTIONS, ESTABLISHING DATA COLLECTION SYSTEMS, TRAINING LOCAL ORAL HEALTH PROMOTERS, AND DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES. HER COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY AND LONG-TERM IMPACT ENSURES THAT COMMUNITIES CONTINUE TO BENEFIT FROM IMPROVED ORAL HEALTH PRACTICES.

HER LEADERSHIP EXTENDS BEYOND THE PROGRAMS SHE DEVELOPS—SHE INSPIRES TEAMS, VOLUNTEERS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO ACTIVELY ENGAGE AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUCCESS OF ORAL HEALTH INITIATIVES. MANDY'S DEDICATION TO PUBLIC HEALTH IS DRIVEN BY A DEEP UNDERSTANDING THAT TRUE TRANSFORMATION HAPPENS WHEN EDUCATION, COLLABORATION, AND ACCESSIBILITY COME TOGETHER.

MANDY MCGILL

Mandy learned early on the power of community and the importance of collective care. Growing up in a small farming town on the Canadian prairies, she experienced firsthand the idea that "it takes a village to raise a child." This deep-rooted sense of connection influenced her career path and instilled in her a lifelong commitment to helping others.

She pursued her education at the University of Manitoba School of Dental Hygiene, immersing herself in the world of preventive oral care. Her journey has since taken her far beyond the prairies, from rural Canada to underserved communities worldwide. She spent two decades in British Columbia, practicing in diverse clinical settings, including a fulfilling role as a dental hygienist for the Canadian Department of National Defence, ensuring soldiers maintained optimal oral health before deployment.

Her career expanded further when she earned her designation as a Dental Hygiene Practitioner, expanding her scope of practice and increasing access to care. As an elected Board Director for the British Columbia Dental Hygienists Association (BCDHA), she worked to advance the profession and remove barriers to dental hygiene care through legislative advocacy.

Mandy's curiosity and dedication led her to public health, where she works for a provincial health authority focusing on maternal and early childhood oral health programs. Through interprofessional collaboration, she integrates oral health into primary healthcare clinics, pregnancy outreach programs, literacy initiatives, and community partnerships—expanding access to prevention education and promoting a holistic approach to health and wellness.

Her passion for global outreach has fueled her efforts to develop maternal-child and school-based oral health programs in rural Africa. These initiatives address the root causes of oral disease, empower local communities, and ensure sustainability through community-led education. Mandy emphasizes that "it is a testament to what can be achieved when we work hand in hand." These programs align with the World Health Organization's Global Strategy and Action Plan on Oral Health 2023–2030, which integrates oral health into primary healthcare and education systems.

One of her most impactful successes has been replacing harmful oral practices, such as infant oral mutilation, with culturally sensitive education and positive behavioral changes. Seeing children take pride in their oral health and witnessing local community members become oral health ambassadors fuels her passion for making a lasting difference.

To further address gaps in health education and resources, Mandy founded the World Health Outreach Association. This year, she launched a mentorship program, allowing students and participants to actively contribute to health and wellness initiatives while gaining hands-on experience. As the Education Director for the World Health Dental Organization and an advisor for The Olmalaika Trust in Kenya, she continues to expand the boundaries of oral health education globally.

Her expertise is shared worldwide through writing, consulting, and speaking engagements. One of her articles for the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association's Oral Health Canada magazine won the 2021 Oh Canada! Readers' Choice Award. Her projects have earned international recognition, including first place in the International Federation of Dental Hygienists (IFDH) Social Responsibility Program, leading to presentations at the 2022 IFDH Symposium in Dublin and the 2023 IFDH Global Oral Health Summit. In 2023, she was honored with the Sunstar/RDH Award of Distinction in Public Health.

Being shortlisted for the Denobi Awards is the crowning moment of a journey defined by dedication and perseverance. Mandy describes this recognition as "not about accolades, but about the urgent need for change and the boundless potential for impact." She is inspired by the incredible individuals and teams she meets along the way. The Denobi Awards unite passionate changemakers, opening new doors for connection and collaboration. For Mandy, the opportunity to celebrate, learn, and share this moment with her peers feels like a dental fairytale come true.



Andreina Sucre Beltran

RDH, MS. INTERNATIONAL DENTIST

MY JOURNEY IN DENTISTRY IS ONE OF REINVENTION, RESILIENCE, AND AN UNWAVERING DEDICATION TO PATIENT CARE AND EDUCATION. IT'S A PATH SHAPED BY PASSION, TESTED BY CHANGE, AND FUELED BY AN UNRELENTING PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE. FROM MY BEGINNINGS AS A VENEZUELAN DENTIST SPECIALIZING IN ORAL SURGERY AND PATHOLOGY TO MY TRANSITION INTO DENTAL HYGIENE IN THE UNITED STATES—WHILE WORKING TOWARD MY ULTIMATE GOAL OF BECOMING A DENTIST HERE—EVERY CHALLENGE HAS BEEN AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND MY PERSPECTIVE AND CONTRIBUTE MEANINGFULLY TO THE FIELD.

MY LOVE FOR DENTISTRY BEGAN EARLY. UNLIKE MOST KIDS, I ACTUALLY LOOKED FORWARD TO MY VISITS TO THE DENTIST (YES, I KNOW, IT SOUNDS ODD). BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THE SCENT OF THE OFFICE, THE PRECISION OF THE WORK, AND THE CARE MY PEDIATRIC DENTIST PUT INTO EVERY VISIT THAT CAPTIVATED ME. GROWING UP IN LATIN AMERICA, WHERE MOST DENTISTS ARE WOMEN, I SAW FIRSTHAND HOW THIS PROFESSION PROVIDED MORE THAN JUST A LIVELIHOOD—IT OFFERED INDEPENDENCE, PURPOSE, AND THE ABILITY TO MAKE A REAL IMPACT. I DREAMED OF FOLLOWING IN THOSE FOOTSTEPS, OF CREATING A SPACE WHERE PATIENTS FELT SAFE, UNDERSTOOD, AND EMPOWERED TO TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR ORAL HEALTH.

ANDREINA SUCRE BELTRAN

That dream carried me through years of rigorous education. I earned my dental degree from Universidad Santa Maria in Caracas in 2002, then specialized in Oral Pathology and Oral Surgery at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. When I finally opened my private practice—ironically in the same building as my childhood dentist—it felt like a full-circle moment. I was exactly where I was meant to be.

But life has a way of testing our dreams. In 2016, my husband and I made the difficult decision to leave behind everything we had built—our careers, our home, our friends and family, and the patients who had become like family—to start anew in the United States. The transition was daunting. Adapting to a new country, a new language, and an entirely different professional landscape felt like navigating a maze without a map. Dentistry, the very thing I had devoted my life to, suddenly felt out of reach. But if there's one thing I knew for certain, it was this: I wasn't going to give up.

Determined to stay connected to my passion, I pursued a new path in dental hygiene, earning my Florida license in 2022. Yet, my heart remained tied to oral pathology. I found a way to bridge both worlds through education—writing, lecturing, and sharing my expertise with the dental hygiene community.

It became more than just a way to stay involved; it became my purpose. By educating others on early disease detection, I not only honored my training but also empowered hygienists to feel more confident in recognizing pathology. That dedication did not go unnoticed. I became the first international dentist invited to speak at prestigious industry events, including RDH Under One Roof (2023, 2024) and the ADHA National Convention (2024, 2025). I've had the privilege of lecturing for numerous state dental hygiene associations and contributing regularly to RDH Magazine, E-Village, and Dentistry IQ. But for me, these milestones are not just personal achievements—they are proof that diverse experiences and perspectives make the U.S. dental profession stronger.

As an immigrant and international dentist, I believe deeply in fostering inclusivity and collaboration in this field. My global perspective—shaped by my experiences in Venezuela and Colombia and my commitment to the high standards of the ADHA and ADA—allows me to bring fresh ideas and approaches to patient care. I envision a profession that values and embraces diverse backgrounds, recognizing the unique expertise that foreign-trained dentists bring to the table.

Today, I wear many professional hats. I practice, educate, and advocate for early pathological detection in South Florida. Through my lectures, I aim to inspire colleagues to feel empowered, not intimidated, by oral pathology. I dedicate time to community outreach, volunteering in public schools to educate non-native English-speaking children about dentistry and oral health, and participating in dental outreach programs to ensure that oral healthcare awareness extends beyond clinical settings.

But beyond my career, I am a mother, a wife, and—when time allows—an amateur baker. These roles ground me. They remind me why I push forward. They teach me patience, resilience, and adaptability. More than anything, my family has been my anchor in this journey—my greatest source of motivation. Every challenge I've faced, every hurdle I've overcome, has been with them in mind. They are the reason I keep going and continue chasing my dream of becoming a dentist in the United States.



LITTLE MOUTHS, BIG CONCERNS: INFANTILE HEMANGIOMAS AND THE DENTAL PROFESSIONAL

By Andreina Sucre Beltran
Photography by Vika Glitter

Hemangiomas are among the most common vascular tumors, yet their clinical behavior is anything but predictable. These quirky little lesions pop up in infancy, grow rapidly, and then—almost like magic—begin to disappear. While most fade without a trace, some cause real issues, especially when they appear in sensitive or functionally important areas. Understanding how they develop, their different types, and how to handle them can make all the difference in patient care.

So why do some babies develop these while others don't? It's a mix of genetics, hormones, and environmental factors. Hemangiomas affect around 4-10% of infants and are the most common vascular tumors in childhood. Interestingly, they have a strong female preference—up to five times more common in girls! Premature infants and those with low birth weight are also at higher risk, which tells us that fetal development plays a key role.

Although hemangiomas often appear sporadically, emerging research suggests a genetic component. Mutations in genes such as GNAQ and GNAI1, which regulate vascular development and endothelial signaling, have been implicated in hemangioma formation. However, no definitive mutation has been identified, reinforcing that these lesions arise from genetic predisposition and environmental factors.

A leading hypothesis involves fetal hypoxia as a primary trigger. When oxygen levels are insufficient during fetal development, the body compensates by upregulating angiogenic factors, particularly vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) and basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF). These growth factors stimulate abnormal endothelial cell proliferation, leading to the excessive vascularization seen in hemangiomas.

The immune system's involvement further complicates this process. Some studies suggest that dysregulated immune responses may amplify the effects of hypoxia-induced angiogenesis, contributing to the erratic growth patterns of hemangiomas. This explains why some lesions proliferate aggressively while others remain small and spontaneously regress.

While most IHs occur in isolation, certain patterns and locations of hemangiomas can be indicative of underlying syndromes:

- **PHACE Syndrome:** This syndrome involves large, segmental facial hemangiomas accompanied by anomalies such as posterior fossa brain malformations, arterial anomalies, cardiac defects, and eye abnormalities. Recognizing the association between extensive facial hemangiomas and these systemic anomalies is crucial for early diagnosis and management.
- **LUMBAR Syndrome:** This is characterized by lower body hemangiomas and is associated with urogenital anomalies, myelopathy, bony deformities, anorectal malformations, and renal anomalies. The presence of extensive hemangiomas in the lumbosacral region should prompt evaluation for these associated abnormalities.



Not all hemangiomas look the same. They can be classified by depth and distribution:

- Superficial Hemangiomas (Strawberry Hemangiomas): These are bright red, slightly raised, and sit on the skin's surface.
- Deep Hemangiomas: Found under the skin, they may appear bluish or skin-colored and have a soft, compressible feel.
- Mixed Hemangiomas: A combination of both, making them a diagnostic challenge.

They can also vary in their pattern:

- Focal Hemangiomas: A single, well-defined lesion.
- Segmental Hemangiomas: Larger, patterned lesions following an anatomical region.
- Multifocal Hemangiomas: Multiple smaller lesions scattered across the body.

While most hemangiomas are perfectly harmless, some can cause problems. The most common issue is ulceration, especially in areas where friction occurs, which can be painful and lead to infection. Bleeding can happen if the hemangioma is injured, but it's usually not serious. More worrisome are cases where the hemangioma interferes with normal function, such as when it's near the eye and obstructs vision or the airway, making breathing difficult.

Infantile hemangiomas are interesting because their cells share markers with placental capillaries, suggesting they might originate from placental tissue. Typically, a newborn hemangioma appears as a small vascular spot or a pale area.

Then, between one and two months of age, it enters a growth phase, becoming a compressible, non-pulsating tumor. This growth usually continues until the baby is between one and six months old, though larger, deeper hemangiomas might keep growing until they're two.

- After this growth spurt, the hemangioma enters a dormant phase, staying the same size and shape. Between 12 and 18 months, it begins to shrink—a process called involution—lasting until the child is between three and seven years old. It's common for these hemangiomas to disappear on their own: about 50% are gone by age three, another 20% by age five, and 30-40% more by age nine. Sometimes, though, they don't change at all.
- For years, treatment options were limited, but then came propranolol—a beta-blocker that changed the game. It works in multiple ways: by constricting blood vessels, reducing VEGF levels, and slowing endothelial cell proliferation, all of which dramatically shrink hemangiomas in most cases. The effects can be seen in as little as a few weeks, making it a highly effective and well-tolerated first-line therapy.
- Propranolol is typically given as an oral solution and requires careful dosing, with close monitoring for side effects such as bradycardia, hypotension, and hypoglycemia. Fortunately, most kids tolerate it well, and the benefits often far outweigh the risks. Regular follow-ups are necessary to ensure the treatment remains safe and effective throughout the course of therapy, which generally lasts six to twelve months.
- For hemangiomas that don't respond to propranolol, corticosteroids remain an option, though their use has declined due to higher side effects. In more severe or resistant cases, interferon- α or vincristine may be considered, though these are reserved for the most aggressive or life-threatening lesions.

For superficial hemangiomas, pulsed dye laser (PDL) can help manage ulceration and residual discoloration, particularly in cases where the hemangioma has already begun to regress. Surgery, while rarely needed, is considered for hemangiomas that don't shrink adequately or leave behind significant cosmetic or functional impairments.

At the End of the Day, What's Our Role?

The good news? Over 90% of hemangiomas resolve on their own without intervention. However, reconstructive treatments can help minimize residual scarring and cosmetic concerns for those who do. Ongoing research continues to expand our understanding of how hemangiomas develop, opening the door to more targeted and effective therapies.

Even though hemangiomas may seem like just another birthmark, their unpredictable nature makes them fascinating and, at times, challenging to manage. Fortunately, advances in medicine are improving how we approach these vascular anomalies, ensuring better outcomes for affected children.

While most hemangiomas cause little to no harm, some can present significant medical or aesthetic challenges. As healthcare providers, we play a vital role in early detection, patient education, and referrals for appropriate management. Being able to recognize hemangiomas, understand their growth phases, and identify possible syndromic associations can make a meaningful difference in a child's treatment and long-term well-being.

Though many hemangiomas resolve without issue, active management is sometimes necessary to prevent complications or long-term effects. As research continues to reveal more about their genetic and environmental origins, treatment options will become even more refined and effective.

By staying informed and proactive, dental professionals can contribute to early identification and referral, ensuring that these small vascular anomalies don't become big concerns for our littlest patients.



Shelley Brown

MED, BSDH, RDH, FADHA

I DIDN'T JUST STUMBLE INTO DENTISTRY—I GREW UP IN IT. WITH MY MOM WORKING AS A DENTAL ASSISTANT, THE SIGHTS, SOUNDS, AND EVEN THE SMELL OF A DENTAL OFFICE FELT FAMILIAR FROM AN EARLY AGE. BY HIGH SCHOOL, I WAS EAGER TO JUMP IN, WORKING AS AN AFTER-SCHOOL HELPER AT A LOCAL PRACTICE. THAT EXPERIENCE WASN'T JUST A JOB—IT SPARKED A PASSION. I LOVED THE FAST-PACED ENVIRONMENT, THE HANDS-ON WORK, AND THE WAY A SIMPLE DENTAL VISIT COULD GENUINELY CHANGE SOMEONE'S LIFE.

THAT PASSION LED ME TO BECOME A DENTAL ASSISTANT, AND FROM THERE, I KNEW I WANTED TO DO EVEN MORE. I WORKED MY WAY THROUGH HYGIENE SCHOOL AS AN ASSISTANT, GRADUATING IN 2008, SETTING THE FOUNDATION FOR WHAT HAS BECOME A LIFELONG MISSION: TO EDUCATE, ADVOCATE, AND MAKE DENTISTRY MORE ACCESSIBLE TO THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST.

SHELLEY BROWN

Building a Career in Education and Content Creation

Now, years later, I'm an educator, speaker, and mobile dental clinician whose goal is to leave dentistry better than I found it. From 2010 to February 2025, I co-founded Hygiene Edge with Candi Kidd, Jessica Atkinson, and Melia Lewis, where we created educational content to support dental professionals. The YouTube channel gained over 25 million views, as well as a silver play button for reaching 100,000 subscribers.

This year, I'm embarking on an exciting new journey—recently launching a new YouTube channel and TikTok dedicated to patient education and minimally invasive dentistry called Shelley.Dental. One of my greatest strengths is taking complex dental concepts and transforming them into bite-sized, easy-to-understand lessons that resonate with patients and professionals alike. With my background in video editing and content creation, I'm bringing dentistry to life through engaging, relatable videos that empower viewers to take charge of their oral health. From tips on preventive care to showcasing cutting-edge techniques, my goal is to make oral health accessible and approachable for everyone.

Supporting Dental Educators and Future Professionals

Recently, Jessica Atkinson, MEd, BSDH, RDH, and I started HYGIENEedgeUCATORS.com, a dynamic hub designed to support current and aspiring dental educators.

This platform connects educators with job opportunities, professional development courses, and industry-leading companies that share our commitment to advancing dental education. Our mission is to empower educators, helping them find their place, refine their skills, and thrive in a community built on growth, collaboration, and innovation.

Since 2009, I have been a clinical educator and adjunct faculty at the Utah College of Dental Hygiene, where I enjoy challenging, inspiring, and preparing the next generation of dental professionals. Guiding baccalaureate students through courses like Embryology, Pediatrics, Expanded Functions, Periodontology, NBDHE Review, and Practice Management, I strive to bridge the gap between textbook knowledge and real-world clinical excellence. With a master's degree in Instructional Design, I design courses that go beyond lectures—creating immersive, hands-on, and relevant learning experiences to ensure my students graduate not just with knowledge, but with the confidence and critical thinking skills to thrive in dentistry. Mobile Dentistry, Recognitions, and Personal Life

Beyond education, in 2020, I founded Homebound Smiles, a mobile dental hygiene practice that provides preventive care to underserved patients in public health settings. My work in this space has reinforced my belief that oral health should be a right, not a privilege—and I'm committed to bringing care to those who need it most.

Attending the Mobile Dentistry Conference for the past three years has been one of the most insightful experiences of my career. It's incredible to be surrounded by professionals who are dedicated to minimally invasive dentistry and bringing care to those in need. Being shortlisted for the Denobi Award for the last three years is an honor, and it reinforces why I do what I do—because dentistry should meet people where they are.

Along the way, I've been honored to receive the 2021 Today's RDH Honor Award, serve on the 2023 RDH Magazine Advisory Board, be a TeethCloud thought leader for Utah, and be recognized as a Top 50 Leader in Teledentistry.

But my biggest achievement? Keeping up with my four young boys while pedaling them around in our electric cargo bike.

I'd love to connect! You can find me on:

Instagram: @shelley_the_hygienist
LinkedIn: Shelley-Brown-RDH
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FIGHTING CAVITIES AT THE SOURCE: HOW POVIDONE- IODINE REDUCES STREPTOCOCCAL SPECIES

By Shelley Brown
Photography by Pavel Danilyuk

The Challenge of Daily Oral Hygiene in Underserved Communities

Imagine not being able to provide yourself with a high-quality daily oral hygiene experience—no interproximal care and what I call ghost brushing, where individuals go through the motions but don't actually clean well. This reality is often true for many patients in underserved or homebound settings, where daily oral hygiene is a challenge.

In 2020, I opened a mobile dental hygiene practice after the passing of a Utah law that allowed dental hygienists to see patients in public health settings without a collaborative dentist. During my visits to patients in their homes, I became acutely aware of the deplorable oral health conditions that many individuals were facing. While I might only show up once every three months, I knew that this wasn't enough to create meaningful, lasting improvements in their oral health. Daily oral hygiene is imperative for overall health and well-being.

The Role of Streptococcal Species in Cavities

Residents in nursing homes develop, on average, one new cavity per year.¹ As I sought ways to help these patients reduce their caries rates, I realized the importance of maintaining low levels of the streptococcal species that cause cavities between visits. That's when I discovered Povi-One, a groundbreaking, one-of-a-kind product composed of 10% povidone-iodine.

Povi-One is FDA-approved for oral decontamination and has preferential activity against streptococcal species, making it a safe and effective option for reducing oral bacteria and improving patients' oral health between professional care visits.

How Povidone-Iodine Works Against Caries

Povidone-iodine 10% works by releasing 1% iodine once it is diluted with saliva, which disrupts the cell walls of bacteria, effectively neutralizing them. In addition, *Streptococcus mutans* relies on glucosyl transferase enzymes to produce glucans—the sticky sugars that help bacteria adhere to tooth surfaces and form plaque-biofilms.

Povidone-iodine 10% has been shown to inhibit glucosyl transferase activity, making it harder for *S. mutans* to attach to the teeth and form biofilms. This prevents the bacteria from releasing acids that cause caries.



The Synergistic Effect of Povidone-Iodine and Fluoride

One of the most exciting aspects of using povidone-iodine in dentistry is its ability to work synergistically with fluoride. A study² showed that a combination of 10% PVP-I and sodium fluoride varnish was more effective in preventing dental caries than fluoride varnish alone.

Povidone-iodine reduces bacterial levels and prepares the enamel for better absorption of fluoride varnish, ultimately offering longer-lasting, synergistic protection.

How to Use Povi-One in Practice

For my mobile patients, the best part about Povi-One is that it doesn't need to be applied daily. The dosage is based on caries risk:

High caries risk - Apply once per month.

Moderate caries risk - Apply every other month.

Low caries risk - Not needed.

Povi-One is applied at the end of the appointment using a pre-dosed ampule. Simply paint it onto the teeth, then apply fluoride varnish directly over the top. Have the patient avoid rinsing or eating for 10 to 30 minutes.

To see how it is applied, watch this video: QR code or link: <https://youtube.com/shorts/U8TiEsqBuVw?feature=share>.



Contraindications and Final Thoughts

Contraindications for povidone-iodine 10% use include:

Allergy or contact sensitivity to PVP-I

Reactivity to iodine (usually during medical imaging)

Beta-thalassemia major

Intraoral wounds deeper than an abrasion (e.g., post-extraction before primary closure—delay use)

Advanced thyroid disease with severe iodine intake sensitivity
Integrating povidone-iodine 10% into care plans for high-caries-risk patients has been a game-changer in my mobile hygiene practice. The research supports its effectiveness, especially when paired with fluoride varnish. But what sets Povi-One apart is its FDA approval and superior stability for oral decontamination.

It's simple, accessible, and makes a real impact on the daily oral health of those who need it most.



Eric Block

DMD, CAGS, FICOI, FICD, FAADS, FIADFE

DR. ERIC BLOCK IS A FULL-TIME PRACTICING DENTIST AND THE OWNER OF ACTON DENTAL ASSOCIATES IN ACTON, MASSACHUSETTS. HE GRADUATED FROM NOVA SOUTHEASTERN COLLEGE OF DENTAL MEDICINE IN 2002 AND WENT ON TO COMPLETE A TWO-YEAR IMPLANTOLOGY RESIDENCY AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY IN 2004. AFTER SEVERAL YEARS OF WORKING AS AN ASSOCIATE, HE BECAME THE OWNER OF A THRIVING MULTISPECIALTY PRACTICE OUTSIDE OF BOSTON, WHICH NOW OPERATES FULLY OUT-OF-NETWORK (OON).

BEYOND CLINICAL DENTISTRY, DR. BLOCK HAS BUILT A DISTINGUISHED CAREER AS AN EDUCATOR, SPEAKER, AND ADVOCATE FOR PROFESSIONAL WELLNESS. HE IS A FORMER INSTRUCTOR AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF IMPLANTOLOGY AND A FELLOW OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ORAL IMPLANTOLOGISTS. ADDITIONALLY, HE IS A FELLOW IN THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF DENTAL SCIENCES, THE INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE OF DENTISTS, AND THE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF DENTAL FACIAL ESTHETICS.

ERIC BLOCK

Inspiration for Dentistry

Dr. Block's journey into dentistry began unexpectedly during his college years at Tulane University. After breaking his front tooth on a beer bottle, he visited a local dentist who not only restored his smile but also left a lasting impression on him. Inspired by the compassion and skill of his dentist, he decided to pursue a career in dentistry.

Although he initially earned a degree in psychology, Dr. Block took an additional year to complete the necessary science coursework before applying to dental school. His background in psychology has greatly influenced his approach to patient care, allowing him to understand and address both the emotional and clinical aspects of dentistry.

Impact on the Community and the Dental Industry

Living and working in the same town has allowed Dr. Block to form deep connections within his community. As a general dentist, he provides a wide range of services, including dental implants, clear aligners, and sleep apnea treatment.

His commitment to comprehensive care has helped improve the overall health and well-being of his patients.

Beyond his practice, Dr. Block is dedicated to promoting wellness and work-life balance within the dental profession. He is the co-founder of the International Academy of Dental Life Coaches (IADLC.com) and serves as a Wellness Ambassador for the American Dental Association. He also previously chaired the Massachusetts Dental Society's Health and Wellness Committee.

Dr. Block is an advocate for professional growth and stress management in dentistry. He hosts The Stress-Free Dentistpodcast and Facebook group, offering guidance and support to fellow dentists. Additionally, he is the host of the Massachusetts Dental Society's podcast, The Fourth Molar: Beyond Wisdom. As an author, he has written multiple non-fiction and children's books, all available on Amazon.

His entrepreneurial spirit extends beyond clinical practice. Dr. Block is a serial entrepreneur, advisor, and key opinion leader in the dental industry. He actively invests in dental start-ups and contributes to the advancement of innovative technologies and business models.

Being shortlisted for industry recognition is a profound honor for Dr. Block, as it reflects the respect and acknowledgment of his peers in the dental field. His passion for dentistry goes beyond patient care—it encompasses mentorship, education, and innovation.

Dr. Block remains committed to supporting his colleagues, sharing valuable insights, and fostering a positive impact on the dental profession. He can be reached at eric@thestressfreedentist.com, and more information about his upcoming events can be found at www.TheStressFreeDentist.com.



Angela Davis-Sullivan

FOUNDER & CEO OF
ADAPTIVE DENTAL SOLUTIONS

I EMBARKED ON MY JOURNEY IN DENTISTRY AT JUST 16, AND I FELL IN LOVE INSTANTLY! MY PASSION IGNITED WHEN I GOT BRACES —I WAS CAPTIVATED BY THE ENTIRE EXPERIENCE AND THE INCREDIBLE TEAM BEHIND IT. THEIR DEDICATION AND ENTHUSIASM INSPIRED ME, AND I KNEW I WANTED TO BE PART OF THIS FIELD.

I STARTED AS THE “FRONT DESK GIRL,” HANDLING EVERYTHING FROM MAILING HYGIENE POSTCARDS TO MAKING PHONE CALLS. THIS INITIAL ROLE BLOSSOMED INTO A FULFILLING CAREER AS AN EXPANDED FUNCTIONS DENTAL ASSISTANT, WHERE I TRULY THRIVED. EVERY MOMENT IN THE PRACTICE FUELED MY LOVE FOR DENTISTRY, AND I EAGERLY EMBRACED NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW.

ANGELA DAVIS- SULLIVAN

As my career progressed, I expanded my expertise into insurance, took on the role of new patient coordinator, and eventually became an office manager and COO. My time in private practice was incredibly rewarding, but I felt a deeper calling to make a broader impact.

That desire led me to consulting and coaching for dental practices, where I could share my knowledge and experience to help others succeed. I founded my own company, dedicated to empowering leaders and helping dental teams create practices they love. Seeing practices transform and thrive under strong leadership became my new passion.

One of my greatest joys is nurturing leadership. I thrive on connecting with doctors and team members who are eager to grow, enhance patient care, and improve communication. Witnessing their transformation is incredibly fulfilling.

It's inspiring to see confidence soar alongside the success of their practices. More than that, the skills they develop extend beyond the workplace, enriching their personal lives as well. Helping others become stronger leaders—whether in their practices, families, or communities—is a truly rewarding aspect of my work.

Being shortlisted for a Denobi Award left me in total awe. It's humbling to be recognized for the impact I've made within our dental community. Seeing the names of previous winners and fellow nominees, many of whom I deeply admire, fills me with immense gratitude.

Being included on this list means the world to me, and I remain committed to making a positive impact on everyone I encounter. We all have the privilege of leading, whether within our teams, families, or communities, and I'm here to support anyone looking to elevate their leadership journey!

Shelbey Arevalo

CEO & FOUNDER OF PATIENT ADVOCATE PROGRAM

MY CAREER IN DENTISTRY AND PATIENT ADVOCACY HAS BEEN SHAPED BY A COMBINATION OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND A DEEP DESIRE TO MAKE A MEANINGFUL IMPACT. FROM EARNING MY CERTIFIED DENTAL ASSISTANT (CDA) CERTIFICATION IN HIGH SCHOOL TO FOUNDED AREVALO ELITE SERVICES AND THE PATIENT ADVOCATE PROGRAM, MY JOURNEY HAS BEEN ONE OF GROWTH, RESILIENCE, AND PURPOSE.

IT ALL BEGAN IN MY SENIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL WHEN I BECAME A CERTIFIED DENTAL ASSISTANT (CDA). THAT ACHIEVEMENT WAS INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT TO ME—NOT JUST BECAUSE IT MARKED THE START OF MY CAREER, BUT BECAUSE I WANTED TO MAKE MY PARENTS PROUD. SEEING THEIR PRIDE AND KNOWING THAT I WAS ON A PATH TO HELPING OTHERS MOTIVATED ME TO PUSH FORWARD AND EXPAND MY EXPERTISE IN THE DENTAL INDUSTRY.

OVER TIME, I GAINED EXPERIENCE IN VARIOUS ROLES, FROM WORKING CHAIRSIDE AS A DENTAL ASSISTANT TO TAKING ON LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN DENTAL OFFICES. AS I ADVANCED IN MY CAREER, I BEGAN TO RECOGNIZE THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE DENTAL BILLING LANDSCAPE AND THE CHALLENGES DOCTORS FACED IN NAVIGATING INSURANCE REIMBURSEMENTS, CLAIMS, AND PATIENT FINANCIAL COMMUNICATION.



SHELBEY AREVALO

My passion for dentistry began when I earned my CDA certification in high school. It was a moment that filled me with immense pride, knowing I was taking my first step into a career where I could truly make a difference. I wanted to help patients, support doctors, and ensure that my work would make my parents proud.

However, as I progressed in the field, I saw a much greater need—one that extended beyond direct patient care. I realized that many doctors struggled with the financial and administrative side of running a dental practice, often taking their focus away from patient care. This realization led me to start my own business, Arevalo Elite Services, with a deep desire to help doctors navigate the complexities of dental billing and empower dental offices with financial clarity.

At Arevalo Elite Services, I work closely with dental offices nationwide, helping them streamline their billing processes, maximize reimbursements, and gain financial clarity so they can focus on patient care. However, my passion for advocacy extends beyond just helping providers—I wanted to bridge the gap between patients and the dental system as well.

That's why I founded the Patient Advocate Program, a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring patients—especially seniors and individuals with disabilities—receive the dental care they need without barriers. My organization currently works with four senior care facilities, providing education, financial navigation, and advocacy for patients who struggle to access care.

Beyond my work with seniors, I am on a mission to become a trusted resource for dental offices—a go-to advocate for patients who require extra support. Whether it's navigating insurance challenges, advocating for treatment approvals, or assisting with financial options, I want dental offices to know they have a dedicated, unbiased expert they can rely on to handle these complex cases with care and expertise.

Being shortlisted for the Denobi Awards is an incredible honor and validation of the work I have poured my heart into. This recognition is not just about me—it's about the patients I have helped, the doctors I have supported, and the mission I am pushing forward. It's proof that my efforts to advocate for patients and support providers are making a real impact.

More than anything, this nomination fuels my commitment to growing the Patient Advocate Program, expanding our reach, and continuing to educate and empower dental professionals. It's a moment of reflection, gratitude, and motivation to keep pushing forward toward a healthcare system where every patient feels heard, valued, and cared for.

I am beyond grateful for this opportunity and excited to continue this journey—because the work is far from over.



MY JOURNEY INTO PATIENT ADVOCACY AND DENTISTRY

By Shelby Arevalo
Photography by Shelby Arevalo

I'm Shelby Arevalo, founder of the Patient Advocate Program and Dental Billing Consultant at Arevalo Elite Services. My passion for dentistry and patient advocacy has shaped my career, but my journey to this moment has been anything but conventional. It has been a path shaped by personal hardship, professional exploration, and an unshakable commitment to improving healthcare accessibility.

My story begins in high school. As a sophomore, my life changed forever when my father suffered a catastrophic stroke. His two main arteries—responsible for communication between the two sides of the brain—had split, a rare and severe occurrence. He was lucky to be alive. My father was the light of my life, and seeing him in that condition was devastating. I found myself accompanying him to physical therapy, helping him eat, and witnessing his struggles firsthand. These moments ignited my passion for helping people and advocating for their needs.

Despite the emotional toll of my father's condition, I remained committed to my education and career aspirations. In 2010, during my senior year, I earned my Certified Dental Assistant (CDA) certification and completed my externship at a dental office. From the moment I stepped into the clinic, I knew I had found my calling in dentistry. Working chairside with doctors, assisting patients, and witnessing firsthand the impact of quality dental care solidified my resolve to make a difference in the industry.

Though my heart belonged to dentistry, I decided to explore a different path in 2015 by earning my Certified Phlebotomy Technician I (CPT1) license and managing a stem cell research lab. While I gained invaluable experience, I ultimately realized my true passion remained in dentistry. This detour was not a misstep—it was a crucial chapter that broadened my perspective on healthcare and reinforced my desire to advocate for patients in the dental industry.

Years later, in 2018, my father became a victim of caretaker abuse, a devastating and deeply personal experience. On Halloween night, I received a call that he had been admitted to a hospital. Without hesitation, I, along with my best friend, drove several hours to the Bay Area where he was located. Upon arrival, I saw my father with nothing but the clothes on his back—wheelchair-bound, vulnerable, and abandoned. With the help of compassionate nurses, I was able to "rescue" him from his dire situation. At that moment, I had no choice but to become his full-time caretaker and legal power of attorney.

Over the years, I saw firsthand how the healthcare system was not designed to make things easy, especially for those with disabilities. The endless paperwork, lack of proper advocacy, and systemic obstacles made it clear that patients like my father needed someone to fight for them. My experiences as his advocate became the catalyst for the work I do today—ensuring that no patient, particularly seniors and those with disabilities, falls through the cracks.

In 2016, while working for Dr. Alizadeh at Marconi Dental Group, a multi-million-dollar practice, I was given my first real opportunity to shape patient experiences. As the lead treatment coordinator in their new office, I was responsible for the "patient experience," ensuring that every individual received the highest level of care and attention. It was there that I was handed my first business card with the title "Patient Advocate." That moment was profound—I felt an immense sense of value in my career, knowing I was positively changing lives through oral health.

Marconi Dental Group was pivotal in my career. We worked with prestigious companies and had access to the best training in every facet of dental operations. The investment in staff education and patient care was unlike anything I had experienced before. The knowledge, experience, and high-level training I received during my time there solidified my passion for patient advocacy and prepared me for the journey ahead.

In 2019, I started my business, initially inspired by a personal relationship. At that point, I had extensive experience in the dental field, having worked my way up to an office manager role, and I recognized the growing need for remote work. I applied for a position with Eassist, a remote dental billing company, and was informed that their vetting process was highly selective—only 30% of applicants were accepted at the time. My expectations were low, but to my surprise, I passed and was accepted.



At the time, Eassist required every contractor to create their own business entity, and that's how Arevalo Elite Services was born. While I absolutely loved the Eassist culture and still speak highly of the company, I realized that it wasn't the best long-term fit for me. Shortly after I left, COVID-19 changed the landscape of remote work, making it the perfect time to launch my own remote billing service. The timing, demand, and my passion for helping dental offices streamline their operations all came together to make Arevalo Elite Services a reality.

In 2023, I took my mission a step further by founding the Patient Advocate Program. This nonprofit organization is dedicated to bridging the gap between patients and dental providers, ensuring that individuals—especially seniors and those with disabilities—receive the guidance they need to access care. From insurance navigation to treatment planning, I help patients make informed decisions and connect with the right providers.

Our future goals include integrating teledentistry, mobile dental care, and community outreach initiatives. We are also developing a membership program that offers affordable advocacy services, ensuring that no patient is left behind due to financial constraints.

The mission of the Patient Advocate Program is to empower patients by removing barriers to dental care, increasing awareness, and advocating for systemic improvements in healthcare accessibility. Our 2025 goals include:

- **Expanding Teledentistry Services:** Increasing virtual consultations and support for patients with mobility or financial constraints.

Launching Mobile Dental Care Initiatives: Partnering with providers to bring dental care to underserved communities, especially seniors and individuals with disabilities.

- **Developing a Comprehensive Membership Program:** Offering tiered plans for ongoing advocacy, discounted dental services, and financial navigation support.
- **Strengthening Community Outreach Programs:** Collaborating with senior living communities, disability organizations, and low-income clinics for education, dental screenings, and advocacy workshops.
- **Becoming a Household Name in Dental Offices:** Partnering with dental practices to serve as a trusted resource for patients needing additional advocacy.

Currently, we are actively working with four senior care facilities as part of our outreach initiative. Our mission is to ensure seniors receive the attention, education, and advocacy they deserve, bridging the gap between dental providers and these underserved patients.

My dedication to continuous learning and professional growth has been instrumental in my journey. I am a proud member of Greater National Advocates, AADOM (American Association of Dental Office Management), and Dental Entrepreneurial Women (DeW). I am also actively pursuing Board Certification as a Patient Advocate (BCPA) to enhance my ability to serve patients effectively.

In 2022, I earned my Medical Billing and Coding certification from Sierra College, specializing in medical billing and collections. Most recently, in 2024, I obtained official training in accounts receivables management, human resources, and financial reporting through The Dale Foundation. These experiences have equipped me with the tools to provide high-level financial and operational support to dental practices while advocating for better patient care.

I am honored to be recognized in the dental industry for my work. In 2024, I was featured on the cover of Dente Magazine and spotlighted in Health News Today, a testament to the impact of my efforts. Being shortlisted for the prestigious Denobi Awards is an incredible milestone, and I am humbled to be among so many talented professionals who share my passion for making a difference.

Beyond my professional achievements, my greatest role is being a mother. Balancing my career, nonprofit work, and motherhood has been challenging but deeply fulfilling. I strive daily to lead by example, teaching my daughter the values of perseverance, empathy, and hard work.

The work is far from over. Through innovation, education, and collaboration, I hope to create a more inclusive and patient-centered dental industry. Thank you, Dente Magazine, for this platform to share my story. Let's continue to create healthier smiles and brighter futures—together!

Brenda McNulty

CEO OF DSO FACTS LLC

WITH OVER 30 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN THE DENTAL FIELD, BRENDA MCNULTY HAS ESTABLISHED HERSELF AS A DYNAMIC FORCE IN BOTH THE CLINICAL AND BUSINESS ASPECTS OF DENTISTRY. AS THE OWNER OF DSO FACTS, SHE HAS BUILT A REPUTATION FOR TRANSFORMING DENTAL PRACTICES THROUGH INNOVATIVE TRAINING PROGRAMS AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS.

BRENDA'S EXTENSIVE KNOWLEDGE AND HANDS-ON EXPERTISE ALLOW HER TO ADDRESS THE COMPLEX CHALLENGES DENTAL PRACTICES FACE TODAY. HER APPROACH FOCUSES ON MAXIMIZING THE TALENTS OF EACH TEAM MEMBER, ENSURING BOTH IN-OFFICE AND REMOTE STAFF OPERATE EFFICIENTLY AND PRODUCTIVELY. BY IMPLEMENTING SYSTEMS THAT ENHANCE INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS, SHE HAS CONSISTENTLY HELPED PRACTICES INCREASE THEIR PROFITABILITY AND LONG-TERM SUCCESS.



BRENDA MCNULTY

Brenda's journey in the dental field began as a dental assistant at Camp Pendleton in Southern California. From there, she steadily advanced through various roles, including dental receptionist, insurance coordinator, and practice manager. Her experience managing dental offices—including one of the first fully chartless practices—gave her deep insights into the operational side of dentistry.

Over the years, she has played a crucial role in launching and optimizing numerous startup practices. Her expert-level training in Dentrrix and other dental software systems has made her a sought-after consultant for offices looking to improve efficiency and workflow.

Brenda's vast experience spans multiple practice models, from fee-for-service clinics to state-funded programs such as Denti-Cal and Medicaid. She has also received extensive education in various insurance models, including HMO, PPO, DPO, EPO, and Reduced Fee Insurance plans.

Her ability to navigate different financial structures in dentistry has allowed her to develop strategies that optimize practice performance while maintaining high standards of patient care. Her deep understanding of insurance systems helps practices streamline operations, maximize reimbursements, and enhance the overall patient experience.

A highly sought-after speaker, Brenda has shared her insights at major dental conferences, captivating audiences with her passion and expertise. Her leadership and guidance have empowered countless dentists and their teams to envision and achieve their ideal practice models.

Now based in Colorado, Brenda continues her mission to elevate dental practices through her company, DSO FACTS(www.dsufacts.net). Her dedication to the dental profession is reflected in her ongoing efforts to raise industry standards, inspire excellence, and drive meaningful change. Brenda McNulty's legacy is one of transformative impact, making her a key thought leader in modern dentistry.

A Journey Into Dentistry

Looking back on my 30-plus years in the dental field, I can honestly say that dentistry was never part of my original plan. As the youngest of seven children in a family where dental care wasn't a priority, my early experiences with dentists were anything but pleasant. I spent most of my childhood with silver caps on my teeth and had already visited endodontists and periodontists long before I had a driver's license. Orthodontics wasn't in the budget, and my smile was never a priority. To me, the dental office was just a place where I endured lectures about my so-called poor oral hygiene. A career in dentistry seemed unimaginable.

Yet, despite these negative experiences, the spark that would eventually lead me to a fulfilling career came in the most unexpected way. While living on Camp Pendleton, a military base in California, I was a 22-year-old mother of two young children, juggling life while my husband was deployed. One day, I came across an ad in the base newspaper that read: "Military wives, we need you!" The Navy was seeking civilians for its Dental Training Program in exchange for 500 hours of volunteer work. With a strong desire to give back to my country and community, I decided to take a chance. I figured if I was selected, it was meant to be; if not, I would continue my life as a stay-at-home mom.

After submitting an essay, passing a test, and enduring a nerve-racking interview in front of high-ranking officers, I was accepted into the program. However, I hadn't planned for childcare, assuming I wouldn't be chosen. Thankfully, my mother-in-law stepped in, commuting weekly from Los Angeles to Oceanside to care for my children while I attended training. Six weeks later, I graduated at the top of my class. After completing my 500 hours in the Navy Dental Clinics, I was officially set free, and my journey as a dental assistant began.

My first job as a dental assistant didn't go as planned. Despite my training, I struggled—badly. I couldn't make a temporary crown to save my life, and in one particularly embarrassing moment, I even fell asleep during a root canal! I was on the verge of losing my job when I discovered a whole new side of dentistry—the business side.

Determined to succeed, I immersed myself in learning about insurance, patient relations, and office management. I attended conferences, read everything I could get my hands on, and soon became passionate about helping dental teams operate more efficiently and effectively. What started as a struggle soon became a career-defining shift.

As I advanced in my career, I took on a variety of roles—from dental assistant to regional manager for a large DSO, consultant, trainer, salesperson, and ultimately, business owner. But beyond the titles, I found a deeper purpose: helping others while creating positive change. My teams and I have been actively involved in volunteering efforts, including Children of Chernobyl, Give Kids a Smile Day, Oklahoma Mercy Mission, and Veterans Give Back. We don't just work to help our patients smile—we strive to make quality dental care accessible to those who need it most.

One of the things I am most proud of is fostering a culture of passion and purpose within my teams. I encourage my colleagues to share in this commitment—not just to provide dental care but to truly make an impact in people's lives. Whether through mentorship, community outreach, or leadership, I have always been driven by the belief that dentistry can change lives far beyond the chair.

When I found out that I had been shortlisted for the prestigious Denobi Awards, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I don't even know who nominated me, but seeing my name on the list of esteemed dental professionals was truly a blessing. I am actively involved in organizations such as the Speaker Consulting Network, Women in DSO, Academy of Dental Management Consultants, AADOM, and Dental Entrepreneur Women, and I have watched some of my closest friends win this award. However, I never imagined my name would be among them.

Being shortlisted for the Denobi Awards is more than just recognition—it is a validation of years of hard work, passion, and dedication to serving others. This honor came at a particularly meaningful time. I had just released my book, *Smile On* (now available on Amazon!), and my company had exceeded all expectations in its first year. When I received the email about my nomination, I was ecstatic. Even my husband, who rarely attends my dental events, said, "I want to go with you!" That moment of support from him was a win in itself.

I am truly honored and grateful for this nomination. In an industry as vast as dentistry, there are few awards that truly stand out, and even fewer that have such a profound impact. To be recognized among the best in the field is something I will cherish for years to come. It serves as a reminder that passion, hard work, and a commitment to service can make a difference—not just in dentistry, but in life.

Thank you for this incredible honor. I look forward to continuing to make a positive impact on the dental industry and in the communities we serve for many years to come.

Oral care
that fits in—
wherever life
takes you.

stimmie



SHAWN OPRISIU RDHBS, ECP III



With over 20 years of experience in the dental field, my journey as a public health dental hygienist has been both fulfilling and purposeful. After becoming a registered dental hygienist, I felt a deep calling to use my skills to serve the community, particularly underserved populations. While I have worked in a variety of settings, my passion for public health has driven me to focus on addressing systemic barriers to dental care.

Working in public health has allowed me to extend my impact beyond individual patient care. By contributing to broader community initiatives, I have been able to help improve access to essential oral health services. These initiatives focus on breaking down barriers that prevent many from receiving the care they need, ensuring that more individuals, regardless of their circumstances, can maintain their oral health.

The most rewarding aspect of this role is witnessing the tangible difference we make in the lives of those who might otherwise go without care. Every day, I am reminded of the power of accessible dental care in transforming lives and strengthening communities. Seeing individuals regain confidence and improve their overall health through proper dental care reinforces my passion for public health and my commitment to making a lasting impact.

SHAWN OPRISIU

My inspiration to enter the dental field stemmed from a desire to make a meaningful impact on underserved children, especially those without access to insurance. Growing up in Michigan, I saw firsthand how a lack of proper dental care could affect a child's health, self-esteem, and overall well-being. I knew I wanted to be part of the solution by working directly with children and families who might not receive care due to financial barriers.

Providing dental care for uninsured children and making a lasting impact on their health and future is what fuels my passion every day. Seeing the relief on a child's face after receiving treatment and knowing that our care can prevent lifelong oral health issues reinforces my commitment to this work.

As part of our mobile dental program in the Kansas City metro area, my team and I provide dental services to over 3,000 students annually, bringing care directly to schools. One of the most transformative tools in our practice is Silver Diamine Fluoride (SDF), which has been a game-changer in managing dental decay for children who may not have timely access to a dentist.

Using SDF daily allows us to stop the progression of cavities and prevent further damage, ensuring that students receive essential dental care even if they are unable to access more traditional treatments immediately. This simple yet highly effective solution has significantly improved the oral health of thousands of children, reducing the risk of severe dental issues later in life. Providing quality, accessible care through innovative treatments like SDF continues to be a cornerstone of our mission.

Being shortlisted for the Denobi Award is an incredible honor, and it holds special meaning for me. This recognition is not just a reflection of my efforts, but also of the hard work and dedication of my entire team and our community partners. It validates our commitment to public health dentistry and highlights the importance of bringing care to underserved children.

This recognition motivates me to keep pushing forward and continue finding innovative ways to improve access to oral health care in our community. The Denobi Award represents the collective impact we have as a team, and I am truly grateful to be acknowledged for the work we do.

COURTNEY JUSTICE RDH, BSDH, FADHA, CH-OSE



Courtney Justice, RDH, BSDH, FADHA, CH-OSE, is a dedicated dental hygienist, advocate, and educator with a passion for public policy and systemic change.

Her journey in oral health began in 2011 as a dental assistant, which inspired her to pursue an Associate's Degree in Dental Hygiene from Argosy University-Twin Cities in 2016.

She later earned a Bachelor's in Dental Hygiene from Minnesota State University, Mankato, and is currently furthering her impact by pursuing a Master's Degree in Political Science.

COURTNEY JUSTICE

With a deep commitment to improving access to care and advancing oral health equity, Courtney has dedicated her career to influencing change through both direct care and policy initiatives. As the Immediate Past President of the Colorado Dental Hygienists' Association, she has played a key role in shaping legislative efforts and advocating for the profession at both the state and national levels.

In her role as a Regional Oral Health Specialist, she supports rural, school-based, and teledentistry programs, ensuring underserved communities in Southwestern Colorado receive essential dental services.

Through her business, Justice Dental, LLC, she collaborates with local dental hygiene programs to teach Interim Therapeutic Restoration (ITR) licensing courses, empowering hygienists to provide minimally invasive care. Additionally, as a Mobile Dental X-Ray CORE Lead with Remote Area Medical (RAM), she provides nationwide training and education to volunteers, ensuring essential dental care reaches even the most remote regions.

Being shortlisted for the Standout Seven Award in Public Health is a tremendous honor for Courtney and reinforces her belief that dental hygiene is a profession built on collaboration and support.

She values the strength of a community where colleagues uplift one another to advance patient care and access. This recognition highlights the impact of her dedication to oral health equity and policy-driven solutions. The rare and invaluable support within the dental hygiene community continues to inspire her to push for a more inclusive and accessible future in oral health.

EVA GRAYZEL
SME (SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT) SPEAKER, STORYTELLER
& ORAL CANCER AWARENESS ADVOCATE



A non-healing sore on Eva's tongue was eventually diagnosed as stage IV oral cancer—tragically ironic for a professional storyteller. The radical surgery and treatment were devastating, but her outcome was extraordinary.

In 2002, while taking public transportation into NYC for a follow-up appointment with her surgeon, she saw a bus ad in large letters: "There is a painless way to know if this is serious." The ad depicted a young woman with a white lesion on the side of her tongue.

Eva's mouth dropped—pun intended. As the bus passed, she noticed the American Dental Association (ADA) logo. When she got home, she left a succinct voicemail on their hotline: "You need to know my story, and I want to help you." They called back.

EVA GRAYZEL

At the time, the ADA was launching an oral cancer awareness campaign and produced a video about Eva's story, distributing VHS copies to all member dentists. A year later, she shared her story live at the 2003 ADA Annual Conference in San Francisco, speaking on the main stage in front of 9,000 dentists. That experience solidified her conviction that patient stories matter. She began crafting her cancer journey with riveting details about the late discovery and the strength it took to persevere through treatment. Her story alone awakened audiences to the urgency of detecting oral cancer in its early stages and educating patients about the signs and symptoms of the disease.

As she moved from dentist to dentist searching for the right one, Eva recognized the lack of patient education on oral cancer. Occasionally, she would see a pamphlet on a waiting room table, but nothing clear, visually appealing, or concise. She never saw a poster outlining the signs and symptoms of oral cancer—something as common as the skin cancer posters in dermatology offices or the breast cancer awareness materials in gynecology clinics. Determined to fill this void, she launched Six-Step Screening.

In 2019, the ADA guidelines required an intraoral and extraoral exam at every dental checkup. Eva translated the screening process into six basic steps: two for the extraoral exam (neck and back of the mouth) and four for the intraoral exam (tongue, cheeks/lips, palate, and floor of the mouth).

She designed posters, goody bag cards, next appointment cards, and self-exam cards to emphasize that oral health is about more than just clean teeth. For this initiative, she was awarded honorary membership to the American Academy of Oral Medicine.

During COVID, Eva launched a global education initiative, translating the Six-Step Screening poster into 20 languages and offering free high-resolution downloads from the Six-Step Screening website: I have such deep respect for the incredible individuals on the front lines – the ones running the practices, caring for patients, mastering the latest clinical advancements. They are the true heroes of healthcare.

I believe that by equipping dental practices with the tools and knowledge they need to succeed, we can create a healthier and more accessible healthcare system for all. My passion lies in helping practices create better experiences for staff and patients alike, and I am honored to be recognized for my contributions to the dental industry.

I believe that making healthcare more accessible is a mission worth fighting for. In my current position at Rectangle Health, we believe we can contribute to that mission, one practice at a time. By helping practices achieve greater financial, operational, and administrative efficiency,

Beyond her advocacy work, she holds several honorary positions, including:

- Patient Representative on the ASCO Head and Neck Cancer Guideline Advisory Group
- Patient Champion for the American Society of Clinical Pathology (ASCP)
- Correspondent at Large for the Oral Cancer Foundation
- Cancer Hope Network Support Volunteer
- Patient Ambassador for the Mouth Cancer Foundation
- Patient Ambassador for the Head and Neck Cancer Alliance
- Patient and Family-Centered Outreach Committee Member for the American College of Radiology (ACR PFCC)

Eva celebrates 26 years cancer-free. She has published two children's books to promote dialogue and reduce fear around cancer, as well as My Story Legacy, a 12-page guide to document personal stories—a gift as valuable as any material possession.



FORTUNE IN MISFORTUNE: A STORY NOT SILENCED BY ORAL CANCER

By Eva Grayzel
Photography by Eva Grayzel

You are a survivor from the moment you are diagnosed. I'll never forget being wheeled away from my husband and mother at Mt. Sinai Hospital in NYC through large double gray doors bearing a diamond-shaped yellow sign reading "No visitors beyond this point." Dressed in a thin cotton gown on a cold metal gurney, I was parked alongside other patients coming in and out of surgery. Doctors and nurses dashed around as I lay there at 8 a.m., waiting for my 9 a.m. surgery slot.

At noon, I called over a nurse. "Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you, but my surgery is supposed to be 12 hours long, and at this point, they'll be operating on me at midnight. Can I reschedule for tomorrow?"

"Aw, honey," she said. "Don't ya worry about it. They do this awl the time. Now, do ya want a magazine?"

At that moment, the frustration simmering deep inside me began to erupt. Why didn't my dentists recognize what was staring at them on the lateral border of my tongue? Why didn't the oral surgeons question the first biopsy? I took my frustration out on the nurse.

"Do you know I may never speak articulately again? I may never swallow normally again! I may not even recognize my own face! And you're asking me if I want a magazine?"

She backed away, apologized, and walked off. I had nowhere to direct my anger but upwards. "How could you do this to me?"

I stopped myself, remembering the wise words of a friend: "When you are angry, you're weak." I wanted to be strong. So I looked right back up and said, "Thank you for doing this to me and not to my children."

But then I lashed out again. "Why stage IV?" Again, I caught myself. "Thank you for doctors who give me hope."

"Why my tongue, out of all the parts of my body?" I had been a professional performance artist specializing in interactive storytelling. Why my tongue?

Once again, I stopped myself. "Thank you for taking one-third of my tongue and not a third of my brain."

When I started to think this way, I felt strength well up inside me. I looked my cancer in the eye and said, "You are not going to squat your ugly face in this vessel because I am going to fight."

This was the unimaginable, made real. One-third of my tongue was removed and reconstructed. Tissue from my forearm replaced the outside of my tongue, and an artery from my forearm was used to feed blood from my carotid to the graft site. A free-flap procedure on my thigh took fascia to replace the bulk of my tongue. Since lymph nodes cling to the sternocleidomastoid muscle, I required a modified radical neck dissection.

Of the 40 lymph nodes removed, three had cancer. I was diagnosed at stage IV. Fortunately, they left the tip of my tongue intact, enabling me to articulate my speech. A head and neck pathologist worked alongside my surgeon, ensuring that no more of my tongue was taken than necessary.

When dental professionals hear my story, they feel sorry for me. But in truth, I am one of the lucky ones.



After surgery, with each passing day, I felt better, which gave me hope. When there is hope, you can forge onward.

Radiation was just the opposite. Every day, I felt worse. I kept thinking, “It can’t get worse than this,” and then it did. I hit rock bottom—unable to eat, speak, or sleep without constant pain. I wanted to quit. I planned my funeral.

My radiation oncologist talked me off the edge, saying, “This isn’t a game you quit; it’s your life.”

Somehow, I endured. I not only survived but regained my ability to speak clearly. With a second chance at life, I was motivated to do whatever I could to ensure that what happened to me wouldn’t happen to others.

Who knew you could get cancer in the mouth? Not I.

If dental professionals aren’t educating patients, then no one is. Had I been literate about this disease—had I known that a non-healing sore in the mouth was a sign of oral cancer—I would have been more proactive.

From this realization, Six-Step Screening™ was born—a patient education initiative to raise awareness about the signs and symptoms of oral cancer.

For this initiative, I was awarded honorary membership to the American Academy of Oral Medicine. During COVID, the Six-Step Screening poster—which emphasizes that oral health means more than just clean teeth—was translated into 20 languages and made available as a free high-resolution download.

Sharing my story gives meaning to the hell I endured and continues to support my ongoing healing process—one that never truly ends.

This personal journey of a non-healing sore in a young, healthy woman who never smoked and barely drank alcohol has inspired dental professionals to raise the bar on oral cancer screenings and patient education.

For me, cancer became an opportunity to save lives.

It’s more than just my mission to educate—it’s my tribute to all those who came before me and my obligation to all those who will follow.

KATHARINE MARTINEZ

MPH, RDH



When I reflect on what initially inspired me to pursue a career in dentistry, I am taken back to my fourth-grade classroom, where I participated in a fluoride swish-and-spit program. Growing up in a rural town in New Mexico, where the water didn't contain fluoride, this program was a vital effort to prevent dental decay.

Many in the community lived at or below the poverty line, and dental issues were a common reality. With few dentists in town and even fewer who accepted Medicaid, I was one of the children who relied on Medicaid and had to travel 45 minutes to see a dentist.

Each visit was a reminder of the cycle I couldn't escape—more fillings, more decay. Despite brushing and flossing diligently, I didn't fully understand what I was doing wrong. It was this experience that sparked my passion for entering the field of dentistry. I wanted to be part of the solution and help children like myself fight against decay.

KATHARINE MARTINEZ

Fifteen years later, my journey as a dental hygienist has been marked by continuous growth, learning, and deep fulfillment. Working in general and pediatric dentistry allowed me to empower patients to take charge of their oral health, but it also left me yearning to make a broader impact on the community. Transitioning out of clinical practice into roles beyond dental hygiene proved to be more challenging than I anticipated. Facing resistance and a lack of opportunities, I spent about five years volunteering to gain the experience needed to enhance my resume.

I interned at a public health clinic, working on a project to secure dentists for low-income patients needing emergency care. I helped design oral care protocols for patients with special needs and complex medical histories, revamped standard operating procedures for home health agencies, and collaborated with oncology nurse navigators to create education and referral systems for patients with head, neck, and lung cancers.

All of these experiences ultimately led me to my current role as an Oral Health Educator at Phoenix Children's Hospital. This position has given me the opportunity to create a unique role without a preset job description and grow it into a thriving program.

Now, our model is being adopted by other children's hospitals, demonstrating the impact of prioritizing oral health in patient care. This work is proving that oral health isn't just an add-on—it's a crucial component of overall treatment and patient outcomes.

I am making a tangible difference in the community by bridging the gap between healthcare and dental care for patients of all ages. By integrating oral health education into the clinical environment, I'm helping to ensure that oral care is no longer seen as an optional part of treatment but as a critical component of overall health. In my role, I work closely with patients, families, and healthcare providers to educate them on the importance of maintaining oral hygiene, particularly for those with complex medical conditions such as cancer patients, transplant recipients, intensive care patients, and individuals with special needs.

through this work, I'm not only improving individual patient outcomes by reducing the risk of oral infections and complications, but I'm also changing the conversation around oral health within the medical community.

By advocating for oral health as a key part of a patient's care plan, I'm contributing to a shift in how healthcare professionals across disciplines view and prioritize oral hygiene. This approach is helping to improve the overall quality of care, especially for underserved populations who often face barriers to accessing dental care.

Being shortlisted for the Denobi Awards is an incredible honor and a moment of immense pride in my career. To be recognized among so many dedicated professionals who share a passion for advancing oral health is truly humbling. This nomination not only validates the hard work and dedication I've put into my role but also serves as a reminder of the impact we, as oral health professionals, can have on individuals and communities. This recognition is deeply personal. It highlights the importance of our work as dental professionals and how our roles, whether clinical or educational, contribute to improving lives. I feel inspired to keep growing in my field, to continue learning, and to share knowledge that empowers others to improve oral health. Being shortlisted for the Denobi Awards is a moment I will cherish, as it reaffirms my passion and dedication to making a meaningful difference in the field of oral health.

JENNIFER BOYCE DMD



Dr. Jennifer Boyce, a proud alumna of the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine, spent most of her career as a private practice owner in Danbury, CT. In 2015, she joined the faculty of the Fones School of Dental Hygiene at the University of Bridgeport as an adjunct clinical dentist. After selling her practice in 2018 and stepping away from private practice entirely in 2019, Dr. Boyce made the decision to dedicate herself fully to her role at Fones, the first dental hygiene school in the world.

In early 2020, Dr. Boyce transitioned into a full-time position at Fones and was named Associate Director of Clinical Affairs in 2021. During this time, she collaborated closely with the University of Bridgeport's grants team to develop innovative programs that addressed the needs of the Greater Bridgeport community. Since 2020, Dr. Boyce, in partnership with the grants department and Fones faculty, has secured nearly \$1,000,000 in grant funding. These funds have supported free care initiatives for seniors, uninsured children, and indigent women in the Greater Bridgeport area.

Advancing Public Health and Teledentistry

In recognition of her outstanding support of the dental hygiene community in Connecticut, Dr. Boyce was awarded the 2020 Gold Star Merit Award by the Connecticut Dental Hygienists' Association. Her commitment to expanding access to care continued through the City of Bridgeport American Rescue Plan Grant, awarded to the University of Bridgeport in 2021. This funding allowed Dr. Boyce and the Fones faculty to develop an innovative teledentistry and mobile dentistry rotation aimed at addressing the post-COVID-19 access-to-care crisis.

JENNIFER BOYCE

This groundbreaking program enables students to provide care within the community, expanding dental services to those who might otherwise go without treatment. Dr. Boyce has presented at several national conferences on the implementation of teledentistry into dental hygiene curricula and was honored with the Teledentistry Innovation in Education Award in 2023.

Pioneering Education in Dental Hygiene and Laser Therapy

Beyond her work in teledentistry, Dr. Boyce has played a pivotal role in advancing dental hygiene education. In 2019, she developed a comprehensive dental hygiene curriculum, including a postgraduate continuing education course in laser therapy for dental hygienists. She continues to train other dental hygiene programs on integrating diode laser therapy into their curricula, ensuring that students receive cutting-edge education in this evolving field.

Her contributions to dental education extend even further. After three years of preparation and planning, Dr. Boyce now serves as the course coordinator for Connecticut's first Expanded Function Dental Assisting (EFDA) program. This highly anticipated program is set to launch in April 2025 with a full cohort. Securing grant funding to support the EFDA program for its first three years, she also ensured that each student in the initial three cohorts will receive a \$2,500 scholarship.

A Denobi Award Nominee and Future Vision

Dr. Boyce's dedication to advancing dental education, public health initiatives, and innovation in care delivery has made a lasting impact on both students and patients. Her leadership in securing funding, developing groundbreaking programs, and shaping the future of dental education has positioned her as a key figure in the profession.

In 2025, Dr. Boyce is honored to be included among a distinguished group of short-listers for the Denobi Awards. This nomination recognizes her unwavering commitment to dentistry, education, and expanding access to care. With a passion for mentorship and innovation, she remains dedicated to elevating the field of dental hygiene and shaping the next generation of dental professionals.



THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HEALTH AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

By Jennifer Boyce, DMD & Marion C. Manski, M. S., RDH
Photography by cottonbro studio

The United States Surgeon General's Report in 2000 affirmed that oral health is essential to overall health. Yet, 25 years later, the misconception that oral health is less important than or separate from systemic health persists. The COVID-19 pandemic created a backlog of patients who were either unable or reluctant to access dental care. While many began returning to their dentist or hygienist in 2021, others continued to avoid dental offices, faced long waitlists due to workforce shortages, or encountered financial and logistical barriers to care.

Misinformation about the safety measures in dental offices post-COVID-19, low oral health literacy, and lack of transportation further complicated access to dental care. Connecticut's Governor, Ned Lamont, addressed these challenges by signing HB 5596, known as Public Health Act 21-9, which allows dentistry, among other professions, to offer telehealth services in the state. The American Dental Association (ADA) has supported telehealth in dentistry since 2015, establishing protocols that have become the standard for quality care.

The Rise of Teledentistry in Expanding Access to Care

COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of telehealth, making it an essential tool for healthcare. Dentists widely agree that telehealth and the integration of hygienists are critical to increasing access to care. By using teledentistry to triage patients and facilitating real-time collaboration between dentists and hygienists, an innovative and timely model of care has emerged.

Recognizing the importance of this approach, the Fones School of Dental Hygiene at the University of Bridgeport secured a \$225,000 grant from the City of Bridgeport American Rescue Plan to address the post-pandemic access-to-care crisis. With the guidance of TeleDent industry experts and funding from this grant, Fones School developed a teledentistry/mobile dentistry rotation for dental hygiene interns.

Technology-Driven Transformation in Dental Hygiene Education

Funding from the grant supported the purchase of two complete mobile operatories,

a NOMAD handheld X-ray unit, digital sensors, instruments, dedicated laptops, tablets, intraoral cameras, and consultations with teledentistry leaders. This initiative sparked a transition to a fully digital, paper-free workflow. The Fones Clinic adopted cloud-based practice management software, accessible anywhere with Wi-Fi. Additionally, a cloud-based patient communication system was introduced to interface with practice management software, enabling providers to access patient data and collect onboarding forms from any location with an internet connection.

Fones School's innovative teledentistry program integrated faculty and students into the Bridgeport community, where they provided both education and clinical care under the supervision of a dentist. While many community-based dental hygiene outreach programs focus solely on education and screenings, Fones' program goes further—offering direct patient care, sharing data with dentists, and conducting live telehealth consultations to ensure comprehensive treatment.



Breaking Barriers to Care Through Mobile Dentistry

By leveraging the core values of dental hygiene—education, prevention, and care—this grant-funded program has helped reduce dental disease by eliminating financial and geographic barriers to care. Dental hygiene interns provided onsite care at a homeless shelter and a school readiness program using mobile equipment.

During public health outreach, faculty discovered that Hall Neighborhood House, a nearby inner-city community center, had recently built a two-chair dental clinic but lacked a provider. While the clinic had large equipment in place, it was missing instruments, small equipment, supplies, and IT infrastructure. Fones School of Dental Hygiene stepped in to bridge this gap, providing the necessary resources and deploying students and faculty to offer care. Within days, they were treating patients at the clinic, which has since become a major educational site where students provide care one to two days per week.

Measuring Impact and Expanding Access to Children's Dental Care

From September 30, 2022, through April 4, 2024 (excluding June, July, and August), the program provided care to 301 patients across 343 visits. Forty-two patients returned for recall appointments, with ages ranging from 1 to 90. Twenty-two patients received non-surgical periodontal therapy, while 105 were referred for additional care. Dental hygiene interns gained invaluable experience in alternative care models, community outreach, and interdisciplinary collaboration with dentists.

The program also ensures that children enrolled in three school readiness programs in the Greater Bridgeport area receive the state-required dental services needed for participation. Head Start locations transport children to centralized treatment sites, where a two-chair clinic can be set up in any available space with Wi-Fi access. This eliminates geographic barriers and allows children to receive care in a familiar environment, reducing parental burden in scheduling and maintaining dental appointments. Referrals for additional care are provided when dental disease is detected.

Redefining the Role of Dental Hygienists and National Recognition

Exposure to teledentistry during clinical education challenges students' perceptions of dental hygienists as mere "tooth cleaners" and reinforces their role as essential dental health co-therapists. Programs that provide care where patients live, work, and receive other services are crucial in breaking financial and geographic barriers to treatment.

The Fones School of Dental Hygiene's teledentistry/mobile dentistry program has earned the 2023 Teledentistry Innovation in Education Award and has been featured in national publications. This groundbreaking initiative continues to shape the future of dental hygiene education and access to care, setting a new standard for integrating technology, public health, and hands-on clinical training.

MISTY MATTINGLY
RDH, BS
SVP & CHIEF HYGIENE OFFICER AT SAGE DENTAL



My journey into the dental field began with a deep desire to make a meaningful difference in people's lives.

At just 14 years old, I recognized that oral health has a far-reaching impact on overall well-being.

I was drawn to dentistry not only for the opportunity to improve patients' smiles but also to educate and empower them to take control of their health.

What inspired me most was seeing the transformative power of comprehensive, compassionate care—not just in someone's smile, but in their confidence, overall health, and quality of life.

This passion became the foundation for my career, driving me to challenge limitations, advocate for hygienists, and push for advancements in patient care.

MISTY MATTINGLY

During hygiene school, I quickly learned that the scope of practice for hygienists varies significantly by state—some states allowed greater autonomy, while others placed unnecessary restrictions on providers. Being told “No” only fueled my determination to challenge these barriers.

After entering the workforce, I saw firsthand how hygienists were often undervalued or overlooked, despite being essential to a practice’s success. That experience motivated me to create an environment where hygienists are respected, empowered, and fully integrated into patient care.

This drive led me to the DSO world, where I had the opportunity to build a hygiene department that prioritizes both patient care and provider support. With full autonomy, we developed a structure that elevates hygienists, fully integrates them into the practice, and reinforces their essential role in delivering quality care.

Serving as the first hygienist to hold the position of Vice President on the Georgia Board of Dentistry and one of the industry’s first Chief Hygiene Officers, I’ve had the privilege of advocating for the profession and driving innovation in patient care. My work has focused on:

- Integrating local anesthesia practices
- Advancing teledentistry solutions
- Implementing 3D scanning and artificial intelligence (AI)

One of my most rewarding accomplishments has been my team’s research in adjunctive periodontal treatment, published in the *Journal of Dental Science Research Reviews & Reports*. This study explored the use of chitosan powder in periodontal therapy, demonstrating its ability to enhance healing, reduce inflammation, and improve treatment success. Seeing research translate into real-world patient benefits reinforces my belief in the power of innovation in dentistry.

Beyond my work at Sage Dental, I am deeply committed to expanding access to care, particularly for underserved communities. I have led initiatives to educate thousands of children on oral health and championed teledentistry solutions to bridge gaps in care. My focus remains on:

- Integrating AI into patient care
- Promoting medical-dental collaboration
- Pushing for legislative advancements
- Conducting research that brings science into practice

At the core of it all, my mission is to ensure that both patients and providers benefit from the progress we’re making in dentistry.

Being shortlisted for this prestigious recognition is an incredible honor and a powerful reminder of why I entered this field—to make a lasting impact on patients’ lives and contribute to a profession that is constantly evolving to better serve them.

I have always believed that those bold enough to think they can change the world are the ones who actually do. I am proud to be part of a dental community that shares this vision, working together to make a difference—one smile at a time.

Official Bio

Misty Mattingly is the trailblazing Chief Dental Hygiene Officer of Sage Dental, with over 25 years of experience combining business acumen with dental care expertise. Her leadership has driven tremendous growth in hygiene, a testament to her commitment to top-tier patient care and innovative practices.

A champion for change, Misty has been instrumental in integrating local anesthesia practices, pioneering teledentistry advancements, and expanding access to care. An international speaker, writer, and researcher, her contributions have earned her numerous accolades, including:

- 2023 Women in DSO Award
- OnDiem Change Maker Award
- Denobi Shortlist honoree in both 2024 and 2025

Misty is dedicated to inspiring change, empowering dental professionals, and leading with purpose to shape the future of dentistry.

CHRISSY FORD
RDH, BSCDH
FOUNDER AND CEO OF FORD DENTAL INSTITUTE



Chrissy Ford, a registered dental hygienist, practice manager, speaker, and published author, is on a mission to elevate dental hygiene education and empower professionals in the industry. As the founder of the Ford Dental Institute and RDH Evolve Dental Hygiene Conference, she is reshaping how dental teams approach continuing education, ensuring they have access to hands-on training and the latest advancements in patient care.

Chrissy's journey into dental hygiene was not a lifelong dream but a serendipitous discovery. Initially aspiring to become a veterinarian, she pivoted to dentistry after shadowing a local dental hygienist—a decision that laid the foundation for her impactful career. Over the past 24 years, she has worked in various roles within dentistry, gaining extensive experience in clinical practice, education, and business management..

Recognizing gaps in the industry, Chrissy launched her continuing education company to bridge the divide between clinical standards and real-world application. Frustrated by inconsistencies in periodontal care from one office to another, she made it her mission to calibrate dental teams and ensure that hygienists, doctors, and managers understand what it takes to build strong, profitable hygiene departments.

CHRISSY FORD

RDH Evolve—Alberta's Leading Dental Hygiene Conference

Her RDH Evolve conference, Alberta's only dental hygiene conference, provides a platform for education, mentorship, and innovation, bringing industry experts together to share knowledge and skills that will shape the future of the profession. Through her mentorship, coaching, and hands-on workshops, Chrissy is helping hygienists rediscover their passion and gain confidence in their clinical skills.

By integrating new technologies, evidence-based treatment strategies, and business training, she empowers professionals to provide higher standards of patient care while fostering career growth. Chrissy's commitment to advancing dental hygiene ensures that clinicians not only improve their techniques but also thrive in their careers.

A Driving Force in the Dental Industry

Chrissy's dedication to advancing the profession is unwavering. Whether through her coaching programs, speaking engagements, or industry collaborations, she continues to be a driving force in shaping the future of dental hygiene—one empowered professional at a time.

Her work focuses on equipping dental teams with the knowledge, skills, and business acumen necessary to create successful hygiene departments. By promoting collaboration between dental professionals, she is helping to elevate industry standards and patient outcomes.

Recognition and Looking Ahead

Chrissy feels honored and excited to be shortlisted for The Denobi Awards—one of the most prestigious recognitions in the dental industry. With nominations worldwide, being selected among such an inspiring group of professionals is truly humbling for her.

For more information on RDH Evolve and the Ford Dental Institute, visit:



www.forddentalinstitute.com



www.rdhevolve.com

MARY E. FOLEY, MPH
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MEDICAID|MEDICARE|CHIP
SERVICES DENTAL ASSOCIATION (MSDA)



Mary E. Foley, MPH, has dedicated her career to improving oral health access for vulnerable populations. As Executive Director of the Medicaid|Medicare|CHIP Services Dental Association (MSDA), she works with government agencies, health plans, providers, and industry leaders to advance oral health equity across the United States.

Ms. Foley earned her bachelor's degree in Health Science from Worcester State University and a master's degree in Public Health, with a concentration in Epidemiology and Biostatistics, from the University of Massachusetts. She began her career as a licensed dental hygienist in Massachusetts, balancing clinical practice with raising a family of five. After two decades in clinical practice,

Ms. Foley transitioned into public health, serving as Director of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Office of Oral Health. In 2005, she moved to Washington, D.C., leading a national campaign to improve oral health for low-income pregnant women and infants. She later became Dean of the Forsyth School of Dental Hygiene, where she expanded enrollment and launched a master's program in Dental Public Health.

MARY E. FOLEY

Driving Policy and National Advocacy

Since 2009, Ms. Foley has focused on healthcare policy, advocating for improved dental coverage for Medicaid and Medicare enrollees. One of her most impactful projects was her collaboration with the National Council on Disability, which led to a 2023 report to Congress and President Biden. This report provided key policy recommendations that have driven significant changes in healthcare for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Shaping the Future of Oral Healthcare

Ms. Foley believes in fully integrating oral health into the broader healthcare system. Her work is centered on ensuring that all Americans have access to affordable dental care, with benefits that meet their needs. She envisions a future where medical and dental benefits are seamlessly connected, enabling streamlined access to care. Through her leadership, she continues to advocate for policies that remove financial and systemic barriers to oral health.

A Recognition of Dedication and Impact

Being recognized in her field is a reflection of the values instilled in her from an early age—faith, family, and education. Ms. Foley's career has been guided by a deep sense of purpose: to serve others and make a meaningful impact. Whether working in clinical practice, public health, education, or national policy, her mission remains the same—expanding access to dental care for all Americans.



EXPANDING ACCESS TO ORAL HEALTHCARE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

By Mary E. Foley, M.P.H., Martha M. Dellapenna, M.Ed., Roxanne Parkins, M.A.,
David Fray, D.D.S., Steven Perlman, D.M.D., M.P.H., Allen Wong, D.D.S.
Photography by Anna Shvets

1. The Crisis in Oral Healthcare for Individuals with Disabilities

Oral healthcare is essential for overall well-being, yet individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) continue to face significant challenges in accessing necessary dental care. A report from the National Council on Disability (NCD), *Incentivizing Oral Health Care Providers to Treat Patients with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, highlights the urgent need for policy reforms to improve access to oral healthcare services for this population.

According to the NCD report, more than 9.4 million people with I/DD in the United States rely on Medicaid for healthcare coverage. However, Medicaid's limited dental provider network and inadequate reimbursement rates create significant barriers to care. Many individuals with I/DD experience poor oral health, which is directly linked to increased risks of respiratory, cardiovascular, and endocrine diseases. Despite the clear need, adults with I/DD remain one of the most underserved populations regarding oral healthcare.

2. Barriers Preventing Access to Care

The NCD study identified several key barriers that hinder access to dental services for individuals with I/DD:

A Shortage of Dentists Willing to Treat Patients with I/DD

Many dental providers are reluctant to treat individuals with I/DD due to the additional training, time, and resources required. The study found that a significant number of providers cited challenges such as:

The need for extended appointment times.

The requirement for specialized training to manage complex cases.

The need for additional staff to assist with behavioral and physical accommodations.

A lack of proper facilities, such as wheelchair-accessible treatment rooms and sedation options.

Inadequate Medicaid Reimbursement Rates

Financial constraints were a major reason why dental providers opted out of treating Medicaid patients.

Many dentists reported that reimbursement rates were too low to cover the costs of care, making it financially unfeasible to accept Medicaid patients. The study revealed that reimbursement rates often do not account for the additional time and accommodations needed for patients with I/DD, discouraging provider participation.

Lack of Comprehensive Medicaid Coverage for Dental Services

Medicaid policies regarding dental coverage vary by state, and in many cases, Medicaid does not provide sufficient coverage for adult dental care. Without mandatory coverage for medically necessary dental services, many individuals with I/DD are left without access to preventive care, leading to worsened health conditions and reliance on emergency room visits for dental issues.

Systemic Policy Gaps

One of the most significant systemic issues is the fact that individuals with I/DD are not classified as a Medically Underserved Population (MUP). Without this designation, efforts to direct funding and resources toward improving oral healthcare access remain limited. The report calls for legislative changes to correct this classification issue and ensure individuals with I/DD receive adequate healthcare support.



3. The Health Consequences of Limited Oral Healthcare Access

The consequences of poor oral healthcare extend beyond dental issues. Individuals with I/DD often suffer from untreated dental diseases that exacerbate other medical conditions, leading to severe long-term effects, including:

Increased risk of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and respiratory infections.

Greater reliance on emergency dental care due to untreated conditions progressing to severe infections or tooth loss.

Reduced ability to communicate pain and discomfort, making dental issues more difficult to diagnose and treat.

Diminished overall quality of life, affecting the ability to eat, speak, and socialize.

Without proper access to routine dental care, individuals with I/DD face heightened health disparities, making it critical to implement policy changes that prioritize their oral health needs.

4. Policy Recommendations for Improving Access

The NCD report outlines several policy recommendations to improve access to oral healthcare for individuals with I/DD:

Redefining “Medically Underserved Populations” (MUP)

Congress should update federal definitions to include individuals with I/DD as a Medically Underserved Population. This change would open up funding opportunities for oral healthcare programs tailored to this group.

Mandating Medicaid Coverage for Medically Necessary Dental Care

Federal and state governments should require Medicaid programs to cover comprehensive dental services for adults with I/DD. Current gaps in coverage contribute to preventable health issues and increased healthcare costs. Implementing an Integrated, Preventive, Value-Based Healthcare Model

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should explore a new approach under Medicare that integrates dental and medical care. A value-based model that prioritizes prevention could reduce overall healthcare costs while improving outcomes for individuals with I/DD.

Increasing Medicaid Reimbursement Rates

Medicaid dental reimbursement rates should be reviewed and adjusted to reflect the actual cost of providing care to patients with I/DD. Incentivizing providers with better compensation could help increase provider participation.

Supporting Training and Education for Dental Providers

Dental schools should integrate I/DD-specific training into their curricula to better prepare future dentists to serve this population. Additionally, continuing education programs should be available for practicing dentists to improve their ability to provide care for individuals with disabilities.

Expanding Workforce Support and Incentives

Loan forgiveness programs and tax credits should be offered to providers who commit to treating a significant number of Medicaid-enrolled patients with I/DD. This would help address the shortage of trained professionals willing to serve this population.

5. The Role of Government and Healthcare Industry Leaders

While these recommendations provide a roadmap for change, meaningful progress will require collaboration across multiple sectors, including government agencies, healthcare providers, advocacy organizations, and policymakers. The role of each stakeholder includes:

Federal and State Governments – Enacting policy changes that mandate Medicaid dental coverage, increase reimbursement rates, and integrate oral healthcare into broader healthcare policies.

Dental Associations and Advocacy Groups – Raising awareness about the need for specialized training and incentives to encourage more dental professionals to serve individuals with I/DD.

Educational Institutions – Incorporating specialized training in dental curricula to ensure that future providers are equipped to care for patients with disabilities.

Healthcare Providers – Adopting best practices for treating individuals with I/DD and advocating for systemic changes within their professional organizations.

By working together, these stakeholders can drive systemic change that ensures individuals with I/DD receive the care they deserve.

6. The Path Forward: A Call to Action for Oral Health Equity

The NCD report makes it clear that the current system is failing individuals with I/DD when it comes to oral healthcare. Without intervention, health disparities will continue to grow, leading to increased emergency room visits, worsening chronic health conditions, and decreased quality of life for millions of people.

By adopting policy changes that emphasize preventive care, increase provider participation, and mandate comprehensive coverage under Medicaid, the U.S. can take significant steps toward achieving oral healthcare equity for individuals with disabilities.

As policymakers consider the report's recommendations, collaboration between government agencies, healthcare providers, and disability advocates will be essential in implementing effective and sustainable solutions. Ensuring that individuals with I/DD receive the oral healthcare they need is not just a matter of policy—it is a matter of health equity and human dignity.

Source: Extracted from Incentivizing Oral Health Care Providers to Treat Patients with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, National Council on Disability, April 5, 2023.

KIANOR SHAH
BS, MBA, DMD, FPKP, FCII, FICOI, FIADFE, FPFA, MICOI,
FICD, RIADFE, DICOI, DIDIA



Dr. Kianor Shah is a multifaceted dentist, inventor, and entrepreneur based in Palm Desert, California. With over 300 dental offices under his belt, Dr. Shah brings unparalleled expertise to his practice, offering services in general dentistry, prosthodontics, periodontics, orthodontics, and more. After earning his Doctorate in Dental Medicine from Southern Illinois University in 2006, Dr. Shah went on to complete an MBA in international business in 2016. He has also become a prominent figure in the dental world through his fellowships with esteemed organizations like the International Congress of Oral Implantologists and the California Implant Institute. As a founder of multiple healthcare ventures, he is a key opinion leader and advocate for advancements in dental care and technology.

Early Education and Career: Dr. Shah's academic journey began at Western Illinois University, where he graduated summa cum laude in 2000 with a Bachelor of Science in Biology, later pursuing a Master's in the same field. His career in dentistry began with a strong foundation at Southern Illinois University, where he was class president and earned his DMD in 2006. Throughout his career, he honed his skills in various dental specialties, making notable contributions in both the academic and practical aspects of the field. His commitment to continuous learning and advancement is reflected in his many honors and recognitions, including numerous fellowships and diplomas in oral implantology, dental aesthetics, and other advanced dental practices.

Entrepreneurial Ventures and Leadership: Dr. Shah's passion for innovation led him to establish and lead several dental and healthcare-related companies. As the founder of Global Summits Institute and Desert Dream Dentistry & Spa, he has pioneered initiatives that focus on both the clinical and business aspects of dentistry. His leadership roles span across numerous organizations, including the International Academy for Dental-Facial Esthetics and the International Congress of Oral Implantologists. Dr. Shah's work as a CEO and managing director has revolutionized healthcare practices, with a particular focus on merging clinical excellence with effective business management.

KIANOR SHAH

Clinical and Management Expertise: Dr. Shah's extensive clinical training covers all aspects of general dentistry, and he has developed expertise in advanced specialties such as oral surgery, implant dentistry, and digital dentistry. He has a unique ability to balance high-level technical proficiency with exceptional patient care. His management capabilities extend beyond clinical practice, incorporating efficiency, sustainability, and expansion planning for dental practices. With experience in strategic business development, mergers, acquisitions, and capital investment, Dr. Shah has reshaped the business side of dentistry, helping numerous practices thrive.

Inventions and Contributions to Dentistry: Dr. Shah is a prolific inventor with patents for the Universal Fastening System, Precision Guided Fastener, and Fulcrum Implant Systems. These innovations have had a significant impact on the dental and healthcare industries, making procedures safer and more efficient.

He has also contributed to several books, including *Pulling Wisdom* (2020) and *Doctor-to-Doctor* (2021), as well as writing articles on topics like safety measures for dental professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. His continuous research and contributions reflect his dedication to advancing the field of dentistry and improving patient care.

Professional Recognitions and Awards: Throughout his career, Dr. Shah has received numerous honors, including the International Association of Top Professionals Entrepreneur of the Year and the Top Doctor Award. His contributions to the field have been recognized by esteemed organizations such as the International Congress of Oral Implantologists, the California Implant Institute, and the Pierre Fauchard Academy. As a recognized thought leader, Dr. Shah has been invited to speak at various international conferences and summits, influencing dental professionals worldwide with his insights on clinical care, practice management, and innovation.

Leisure and Interests: Beyond his professional accomplishments, Dr. Shah enjoys a rich and active lifestyle. He is passionate about world travel, public speaking, and studying historical events. His hobbies include soccer, fitness, and table tennis, which complement his commitment to health and wellness. Dr. Shah is also deeply involved in dental politics, ethics, and law, advocating for improvements within the profession. He continues to be an avid researcher, contributing to both scientific and educational projects related to dentistry and beyond.

Professional Memberships: Dr. Shah is a member of several prestigious dental and academic organizations, such as the International Academy for Dental-Facial Esthetics, the International Congress of Oral Implantologists, and the American Dental Association. He is also affiliated with the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, the Beta Beta Beta Biological Honors Society, and many other academic and professional groups. His active participation in these societies demonstrates his commitment to professional growth and his desire to stay at the forefront of dental research and practice.



DENTAL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ASSOCIATION SPARKS A GLOBAL PARADIGM SHIFT

By Kianor Shah
Photography by Cottonbro
Studios

The Dental AI Association (DAIA) has announced the expansion of its groundbreaking global initiative, uniting artificial intelligence (AI) and dentistry across all continents and territories. As the world's first international organization dedicated to integrating AI into dental care, DAIA is setting new standards in education, research, innovation, and collaboration for dental professionals and teams worldwide.

Supported by the Global Summits Institute (GSI) through its World's Top Doctors initiative, DAIA introduces a revolutionary approach to advancing dental practices through cutting-edge technology.

Revolutionizing Dental Care with AI

As a leading authority on AI in dentistry, DAIA is transforming patient care by enhancing diagnostic precision, optimizing treatment planning, and improving clinical outcomes.

By bridging technology with dental expertise, the organization is driving innovation and fostering a seamless integration of AI into dental workflows.

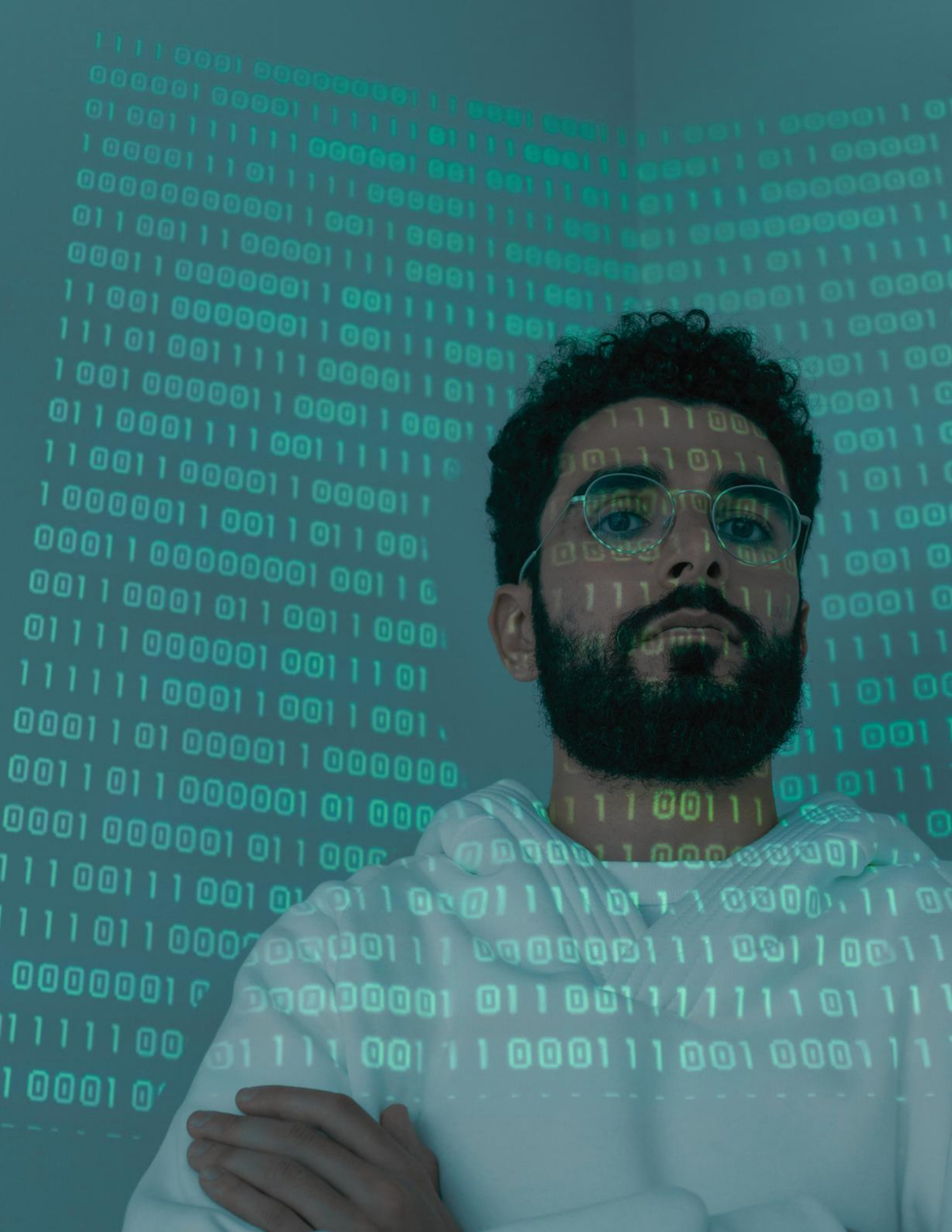
"After five years of working on these projects, we are thrilled to offer a comprehensive and sustainable healthcare model where access and quality of care are increased, costs to patients and doctors are reduced, and collaboration between providers is maximized. Our hope is that other healthcare professions discover our initiative and implement its successes to improve the quality of human life in their respective fields," said Dr. Kianor Shah, co-founder of DAIA.

With AI's transformative potential in diagnostics, patient management, and practice operations, DAIA empowers dental professionals with advanced academic resources, cutting-edge training programs, and research opportunities.

A Vision for Global Impact

The establishment of DAIA marks a pivotal moment in dentistry, bringing AI into every facet of dental care. This integration is poised to elevate education, ethical standards, and technological advancements, ultimately enhancing the quality of dental healthcare worldwide.

By fostering collaboration among dental professionals, researchers, technologists, suppliers, educators, and legal experts, DAIA is leading the charge in revolutionizing the future of dentistry through AI-driven solutions. Members will gain access to state-of-the-art tools that enhance diagnostic accuracy, treatment efficiency, patient care, and operational management, ensuring they remain at the forefront of technological advancement.



Empowering the Global Dental Community

At the heart of DAIA is its Global Dental Community, a professional network offering exclusive opportunities to engage with the latest AI advancements. Membership benefits include:

Comprehensive education and AI certification through the Dental AI Academy.

Research initiatives advancing AI's practical applications in dentistry.

Resources for AI adoption in diagnostics, treatment planning, and patient management.

Networking opportunities with global leaders in AI and dentistry to foster collaboration and innovation.

Setting New Standards in AI-Driven Dentistry

DAIA is structured around seven specialized committees that address current challenges and opportunities in AI and dentistry. These committees work to establish ethical guidelines, clinical protocols, and technological benchmarks to ensure AI's responsible and effective implementation.

By fostering international collaboration and upholding rigorous standards, DAIA aims to make high-quality AI-enhanced dental services accessible worldwide. From improving diagnostic precision to optimizing patient care, the organization is committed to setting a new global standard for excellence in dentistry.

Join the Future of Dentistry with DAIA

DAIA offers a tiered membership structure designed to meet the diverse needs of dental professionals, practice teams, researchers, innovators, technicians, administrators, and individuals involved in the dental supply chain.

Members gain access to continuous education, research initiatives, and specialized resources to integrate AI into their practices effectively. Through The DAIA Promise, the organization is dedicated to empowering dental professionals and elevating patient care through AI-driven advancements.

Those looking to be part of this transformative movement can join DAIA and take an active role in shaping the future of dentistry.

SAGE DENTAL

Sage Dental Regional Hygiene Team



Misty Mattingly is the trailblazing Chief Dental Hygiene Officer of Sage Dental, with over 25 years of experience combining business acumen with dental care expertise. Misty's impressive journey has brought tremendous growth in hygiene, a testament to her commitment to top-notch patient care and innovative practices. Her advocacy has been instrumental in integrating local anesthesia practices and pioneering tele-dentistry advancements. An international speaker, writer, and researcher, Misty's contributions have earned recognition including the 2023 Women in DSO Award, the OnDiem Change Maker award, and spots on the Denobi Short List in both 2024 and 2025. Misty is committed to inspiring change and leading with purpose in the dental community. This recognition is not just a reflection of individual achievements, but of the strength and unity of a team that strives for excellence in every aspect of our work.



Erica is a Regional Hygiene Specialist, a dental hygienist with 15 years of experience, currently practicing in Orlando, FL. Her passion for dentistry began early, but a personal experience with poor dental communication fueled her desire to educate patients about their treatment options. After being diagnosed with cavities and receiving limited information about treatment choices, she realized the importance of informed decision-making in dental care. Erica is dedicated to helping patients understand the link between oral health and overall well-being, while mentoring other hygienists to advocate for their patients. Being shortlisted for a Denobi award is a humbling recognition of her team's commitment to excellence in patient care and education.

SAGE DENTAL

Sage Dental Regional Hygiene Team



Alex Bajer, CDA, CRDH, transitioned into dentistry from a successful sales career, driven by a childhood curiosity about the roles of his dentist and hygienist. His passion for dental hygiene led him to excel in assessing patient needs and providing effective solutions. A strong advocate for integrating technology, Alex has contributed to advancements in the field, including research on the role of chitosan in periodontal care. Shortlisted for recognition, Alex's dedication to the profession is evident in his commitment to exceptional patient care.



Odalys, known as Ody, is a seasoned Regional Hygiene Specialist and dental hygienist with over 33 years of experience. She earned her degree from Miami Dade College and is the Regional Hygienist Specialist for Sage Dental, overseeing several locations in South Florida and Tampa. Ody's healthcare began at 16 when a schoolwork program introduced her to the field, and she found a mentor in Dr. Robert Farman, a periodontist, who ignited her passion for dentistry. Throughout her career, she has mentored fellow hygienists, advocating for a holistic approach to patient care and emphasizing the link between oral health and overall well-being. Being shortlisted for the Denobi Award is a proud acknowledgment of Ody and her team's dedication to excellence in patient care and continuous improvement.



Ladrika Joseph, Regional Hygiene Specialist, began her career as a Dental Assistant, where she was inspired by the transformative effects of dental hygiene—from boosting self-esteem to alleviate pain. This motivated her to further her education and become a Dental Hygienist, driven by a desire to promote preventive care and healthy practices within the community. Being shortlisted for an award is a significant recognition of the journey she and her team have taken, highlighting the importance of collaboration. Each team member brings something unique, and together, they create meaningful changes. Tackling challenges as a team not only achieves their goals but also strengthens their bond as colleagues.

SAGE DENTAL REGIONAL HYGIENE TEAM

The Sage Dental Regional Hygiene Team is revolutionizing the dental industry with its innovative approach, outstanding performance, and a culture that prioritizes both patient care and professional growth. Led by SVP & Chief Hygiene Officer Misty Mattingly, the team includes talented professionals such as Erica Cervantes, Alex Bajer, Odalys Bello-Quintero, and Ladrika Joseph. As hygienists, they recognize the responsibility they carry in being seen as providers rather than just individuals who clean teeth. Their dedication ensures their work is never taken lightly.

The team's primary goal is to cultivate a welcoming environment that feels like home for both patients and hygienists. Their work extends beyond treatment—it's about building lasting relationships, improving health outcomes, and contributing to the advancement of the dental field.

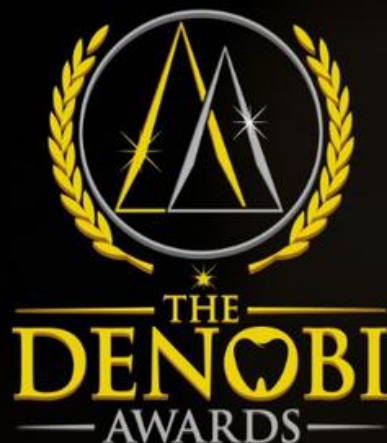
At the core of Sage Dental's success is a commitment to technological innovation. By integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into daily practice, the team has improved diagnostic accuracy, treatment planning, and patient communication. AI streamlines workflows, enables earlier detection of dental issues, and enhances operational efficiency, allowing hygienists to focus on delivering precise, personalized care.

Beyond clinical advancements, the team utilizes state-of-the-art communication platforms to enable real-time collaboration and optimize operations. This approach enhances both care delivery and efficiency, ensuring that every patient receives comprehensive, high-quality treatment.

Professional development is a cornerstone of the Sage Dental Hygiene Team's success. Through mentorship programs and continuous career growth opportunities, hygienists receive support both professionally and personally. They have access to leadership development, cutting-edge clinical training, and a strong support system that fosters loyalty, motivation, and high retention.

The team is also making significant contributions to dental research and innovation. They were the first dental service organization (DSO) to pioneer the use of biomimetic technologies like Curodont for tooth repair. Additionally, their groundbreaking research on adjunctive periodontal treatment, specifically their study on Chitosan powder, showcases their commitment to improving clinical outcomes and advancing patient care through scientific discovery.

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World
**Mission
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World Mission Partners



Ed Pease

Patti Pease



WORLD MISSION PARTNERS

World Mission Partners is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing essential dental care to underserved communities, particularly in the Dominican Republic. Through a strong network of volunteers, donors, and dental professionals, the organization facilitates mission trips, equips clinics, and ensures sustainable healthcare solutions for those in need. Led by passionate individuals like Patti Pease, World Mission Partners collaborates with hospitals and local providers to bring high-quality dental services to communities with limited access to care.

One of the organization's most impactful efforts has been in the Bateyes region, where extreme poverty and lack of healthcare infrastructure leave many residents without basic medical and dental services. The mission of Samaritan Hospital in La Romana, supported by World Mission Partners, is to serve those with no voice and no resources. Through their work, a state-of-the-art dental clinic and a mobile dental unit have been established to bring much-needed care to these remote villages.

Recognizing the urgent need for better dental facilities in the Dominican Republic, World Mission Partners played a key role in the development of a modern dental clinic near the Bateyes. The initiative was supported by generous donations from U.S. dental professionals and organizations, with additional backing from Jay Geier and Dr. David Ahearn, who were instrumental in the clinic's construction and funding.

At the clinic's dedication ceremony, the impact of this project was evident. The event was attended by government officials, military leaders, and community members, highlighting the significance of this initiative. Patti Pease described the moment as "electric," emphasizing that the clinic would serve both insured and uninsured patients, ensuring access to quality dental care for all. This facility is now considered one of the most advanced dental clinics in the region, setting a new standard for care in Central America.

World Mission Partners' efforts extend beyond the clinic. To ensure long-term sustainability, the organization is committed to training and equipping local dental professionals. Plans are underway to establish a state-of-the-art training center, where Dominican dentists and volunteers can receive ongoing education to enhance their skills and provide high-quality care to their communities.

Additionally, the mobile dental unit continues to serve those in the most remote areas, identifying patients who need further treatment and coordinating their care at the new clinic. The organization welcomes volunteers, donations, and mission trip participants to help expand its reach and improve oral health for underserved populations.

By fostering collaboration between U.S. dental professionals and local healthcare providers, World Mission Partners is not only treating patients but also creating a lasting impact on the future of dental care in the Dominican Republic.



THE
DENOB
— AWARDS —





W I N N E R S



EMME SANDERS



EMILY STEIN



EVA GRAYZEL



MARY E. FOLEY
2025 PINNACLE
ACHIEVEMENT RECIPIENT



JANET CROSSWHITE



KENTUCKY MORROW



HEATHER BOLTON



MARIYA FILIPOVA



KIANOR SHAH



JESSICA WOODS
2025 DENTISTRY'S
THOUGHT LEADER RECIPIENT



JASDEEP KAUR CHEEMA



SHAWN OPRISIU



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