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A Call to Do Better

Addressing Diversity Within the Dental Profession

Fabiola Milord, D.D.S., M.P.H.

Current systems have not been successful in addressing the existing racial inequities between black dental professionals and other racial groups. These dentists in particular seem to have less visibility and representation in organized dentistry. At no time has this been more obvious than during the COVID-19 pandemic, when African-American professionals were not as prominently featured among those offering their viewpoint and expertise. The following editorial provides insights regarding the topic of diversity in order to gain perspective into a situation that has existed for far too long.

DURING THE 2021 NYSDA HOUSE OF DELEGATES meeting, something momentous happened. The 102-member body voted to recognize February as Black History Month by having an African-American Speaker of Excellence present information for continuing education credit. In addition, NYSDA will be highlighting a black member dentist who has significantly contributed to the dental profession. While the proposal stirred significant discussion, the vast majority of the House was in favor of the groundbreaking change, forging a path for black dentists to have a seat at the table of organized den-

tistry, where they will be acknowledged for their efforts, and serve to raise awareness within their areas of knowledge and expertise.

A 2012 University at Albany report, supported by the New York State Department of Health and the New York State Education Department,^[1] finds that “Black/African Americans were underrepresented among New York’s dentists relative to the state’s population (3% compared to 14%), as were Hispanics/Latinos (5% compared to 18%).” To further emphasize the point of black contributions, a 2020 Health Policy Institute study released by the American Dental Association^[2] indicates that the vast majority of Medicaid providers across the U.S. (63%) are black, followed by 51% Hispanic. This disproportion of treating the underserved is but a hint of the imbalance within oral healthcare, as well as within the profession itself, both statewide and nationally.

So, how do we go about improving representation within the profession? This has been debated and thought about by many experts; however, the results seem to be minimal and sporadic at best.

Early Awareness

Getting students excited about the profession from an early stage in their career can produce the future professionals we’re looking for. Efforts

need to be initiated at the junior high school and high school levels. As an example, at New York University College of Dentistry, The Saturday Academy Program,^[3] led by Dr. Lorel Burns and Dr. Cheryline Pezzullo, is one approach to making this happen. The goal of the program is to introduce underrepresented high school students to the dental profession.

A similar program has been instituted at the University at Buffalo.^[4] These programs are planting a seed that makes a long-lasting impression on young minds that may not have even thought of dentistry as a career choice. Likewise, in an interview by the leadership of Touro College of Dental Medicine, Albert Granger, D.D.S., described programs like that offered at the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra University that have made facilitating and aiding the underrepresented part of its mission.^[5]

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Mentorship

Having mentors to look up to enables the mindset of attainability. The profession should be made to feel achievable for those who are willing to meet its high standards of distinction and put in the work and effort necessary to achieve it. Having national and international speakers out front, winning awards, giving lectures, and as instructors on college and university campuses as faculty members and being recognized for their endeavors, as well as sharing their proficiency and accomplishments should be more commonplace within the dental workforce.

Accessibility and Affordability

Minority students who are serious about dental school face the extraordinary financial burdens associated with test preparations, access to tutors, school application fees, admission down payments, not to mention tuition and cost-of-living

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expenses. Dental school is a costly four- to six-year undertaking running well into hundreds of thousands of dollars. Understandably, this is a challenge for any dental student regardless of race; however, given the well-documented wealth gap between blacks and whites, the challenges for blacks are even greater.^[6,7] A broader range of public/private partnerships involving grants, low-interest student loans, and student loan forgiveness before, during and after dental school for low-income minority students needs to become part of the conversation in order to shore up financial assistance for future black dental professionals.

A Top-Down Approach

As previously mentioned, the discussion about what to do and how to address these issues has been ongoing and has taken different forms at both the state and local level. NYSDA has convened a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to tackle these concerns. The American Dental Association runs its Institute for Diversity in Leadership.^[8] It also led Diversity Summits in 2010,^[9] 2015^[10] and, most recently, at its 2021 Annual Meeting.^[11] While these initiatives and efforts are admirable and worthwhile, they have done little to move the needle in producing significant change in minority recruitment of both students and faculty.



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An Individualized Approach

An individualized approach by those in visible positions of influence engaging students or dentists may gain more traction in tackling this issue. The idea of one dentist mentoring another so as to encourage him or her to assume responsibility, join the profession, move up the ladder, espouse leadership and encourage those with potential may be one such way to begin the process and gain momentum. Also, at the student level, the idea and aspiration of managing one's own business should be emphasized, making it a valuable goal to be sought after and, ultimately, fulfilled.

The need to incorporate more minority dentists into the profession cannot be overstated or clearer. A commendable start is the recognition of Black History Month. The latest in current events played a role in exposing the sharp underrepresentation that exists. The necessity for these conversations now will, it is hoped, result in better diversity and representation in the future. Long-lasting, targeted initiatives are essential to show a modicum of change. ▄



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