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## Interview: Dr. Eric Knudsen 2023-24 MDA President

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A full-page photograph of Dr. Eric Knudsen, a middle-aged man with short brown hair and glasses, smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing dark blue V-neck scrubs over a white t-shirt. A stethoscope is draped around his neck, and he holds a clipboard with a yellow folder in his left hand. His right hand rests on a light-colored wooden desk. In the background, a blurred office setting is visible, including a wooden bookshelf filled with books and a white printer. A semi-transparent white box containing the title text is positioned over the lower right portion of the image.

# Interview: Dr. Eric Knudsen 2023-24 MDA President



Meet this general dentist from Escanaba, now serving as MDA president for the current administrative year. He's knowledgeable, enthusiastic, ready to serve, and focused on success for our grassroots members across the state. He's also only the third MDA president from the Upper Peninsula in the past 60 years.

**D**r. Eric Knudsen, of Escanaba, took over as MDA president on May 6 at the second meeting of the 2023 MDA House of Delegates in Grand Rapids. He brings to the association the perspective of a member from the Upper Peninsula, as well as a family tradition of dentistry — his father, Dr. William Knudsen, was also a dentist, as is his wife, Beth.

Knudsen is a 1995 graduate of the University of Michigan School of Dentistry. Among other positions in organized dentistry, he's served as president of the Cloverland District Dental Society, as a delegate to the MDA House, as a member of numerous MDA committees, as a member of the MDA Board of Trustees, as MDA secretary-treasurer, and finally as president-elect this past year. He's represented the 9th District at the ADA House since 2017. He's a member of Omicron Kappa Upsilon Dental Honor Society, and a Fellow in the Pierre Fauchard Academy, the American College of Dentists, and the International

College of Dentists. He's also active in community organizations back home in Escanaba.

The *Journal* recently sat down with Knudsen to talk about his upcoming year in office, his goals, and to listen to his comments on many of the issues facing Michigan dentistry today.

***Journal:* Congratulations on becoming the MDA's newest president. I know this comes after many years of involvement. So, now that you're president, what are your goals for your year?**

**Knudsen:** Thank you. You know, it's strange. Multiple times when I was running for trustee I was asked what my "agenda" was for running for office. I never had an answer, and that was truthful — my thought is that you always run to serve on a board in an advisory role, not to have particular topics driving your motives. But now, as incoming president, I acknowledge that I do have an

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opportunity to influence or affect issues that I feel are important. So, there are a few things that I would like to address this year.

First, the most pressing issue that I feel we are facing within dentistry is access to care. There are multiple facets that affect access: the shortage of dentists and support staff in rural or remote or isolated areas, disproportionate or inadequate insurance reimbursements, and dental hygiene and assisting programs with extensive wait lists that result in students having to wait years to start, thus dis-

couraging many to even apply.

Second, I'd like to promote and encourage the use of two existing MDA programs, the Member Assistance Program and the MDA Health and Well-Being Program. Both programs are available for MDA members, as well as their family members. The Member Assistance Program offers both mental health counseling and work-life resources. We have a mental health crisis in our country, and this is a great program that unfortunately is underutilized by our members. The MDA Health and Well-being program

confidentially matches a concerned colleague with members going through an alcohol or substance abuse problem or related issues. Dentistry is a very stressful profession, and if things get out of control, these programs are there for our members. The details and access to both these programs are available on our website, [michigandental.org](http://michigandental.org).

Finally, a very rewarding thing in our practice, for both professional satisfaction and staff morale, has been participating in the Donated Dental Services program. We started



**At the office** — Members of the Knudsen dental team include (left to right) Angie Hunter, Holly Flynn, Pam Marenger, Jeanne Jones, Donna Deno, Haile Waters, and Karissa Dagenais. Missing from photo are Emily LaFave and Makayla Dunlap.



treating patients through the program after the late Dr. John Buchheister, who was a former MDA president, came to the U.P. Dental Meeting and explained the aspects of the program during his presidential update. We usually see one or two patients a year through this program. All have been vetted, and the program even lines up participating dental labs, if needed. I've volunteered many times in other clinics/settings, but I feel this is one of the reasons why the DDS program is so special and successful — you are doing dentistry in your own office, where you are most efficient. It's a great program, and I hope I can encourage even more members to volunteer.

**Journal:** You're the first MDA president from the Upper Peninsula in many years, since Dr. Gary Asano in 2000-01. Are there any special concerns of U.P. dentists that you've identified?

**Knudsen:** Yes. We're facing an extreme shortage of dentists, along with trained dental assistants and dental hygienists. Many practices have had to limit taking new patients, as they have a difficult time taking care of their existing patients.

Speaking of MDA presidents — ironically, I grew up living next door to the previous MDA president from the U.P. before Dr. Gary Asano, Dr. Vernon Johnson. (*President during 1966-67 — Ed.*)

**Journal:** We hear from members in small towns, less-populated areas, and in the U.P. who are nearing retirement that it is difficult to sell a practice outside of a major metropolitan area. Is there a solution to this problem? What are some of the advantages of practicing in a smaller community?

**Knudsen:** There has to be a change in the mindset for those selling rural practices. I think rural practitioners have to plan on the possibility that



**Family tradition —** Dr. Knudsen followed in his father's dental footsteps, and now practices with his wife, Beth. Their son Matt is currently a D4 student at U-M.

they might not be able to sell their practice, or that it will take longer and possibly sell at a lower value than they'd like. I think that you also just need to consider the long-term positives — the lower overhead, higher income, and higher quality of life over the years far outweigh the final price of the practice sale. When you practice in a smaller community, it becomes such a part of you, kind of like having a very big extended family, which is both good and bad! But that's something that concerns us as we get older. We want to do everything we can to ensure that our patients are taken care of in the future, after we retire and stop practicing.

**Journal:** What about busyness? Are our member offices busy enough? Has business rebounded enough since the pandemic?

**Knudsen:** We're too busy — patient flow has fully returned, but the challenges of staffing and the high

price of supplies still exist. We need to do everything we can to encourage people to get trained, especially dentists, registered dental assistants, and registered dental hygienists. My answer might be skewed to the rural practices, but from people I've spoken with across the state, it isn't a lack of patients that is the problem!

**Journal:** That's what the MDA has been hearing as well. Also, in some areas we understand there's a shortage of specialists. Is that true in your experience? What can be done about that?

**Knudsen:** In my experience, there is a shortage. Our patients frequently face a wait of two or three months at times to be seen. We are doing more to try to keep patients out of pain and be even more proactive on things like third molar extractions, and so on. We're doing a lot of recruiting and talking to students and faculty trying

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to get the word out about rural dentistry opportunities.

**Journal:** *On another note, some of our MDA components are having a tough time finding volunteer leaders — people to serve as president, on boards, as editor, etc. Why do you think this is? Is there a solution? Can organized dentistry use technology to make that connection easier?*

**Knudsen:** Our members have a lot of things competing for their time

— families, children, sports, kids' activities, their own practices, etc. The MDA's LEAD program has been a terrific pipeline for volunteer leaders, and we need to keep encouraging people to participate. Technology is something that can help, too; for example, videoconferencing can save on travel time. Even for people living in southern Michigan, a three-hour meeting in Okemos turns into a full-day affair if you have to drive one or two hours each way.

**Journal:** *We've found that our members definitely like the option of meeting on Zoom, rather than driving.*

**Knudsen:** That's right! It saves a lot of time.

**Journal:** *Legislative and governmental advocacy is always a top priority of our members, and it's an important part of the MDA strategic plan. What do you see as the most pressing issues today in terms of MDA advocacy?*

**Knudsen:** One of the first things that I think of legislatively is the dental/medical loss ratio action in Massachusetts. That's been in the news. Other states are looking at that. I think that it's a win for patients, that more of their premium dollars are spent on their dental care rather than inflated administrative costs going to the insurance companies.

**Journal:** *The MDA and ADA have identified the new dentists segment, particularly the most recent graduates, as a weak spot in terms of membership. How can we make membership more appealing to new graduates, particularly those with high student debt loads and/or who work for large group practices?*

**Knudsen:** We could lobby for making interest on student loans to start after graduation, not from when they take out the loan as it is now. That ties in with advocacy. They could save tens of thousands of dollars just due to the accrued interest. But we need to be welcoming to new grads in all practice styles, and especially to those who choose to work in large group practices. Dentistry is not practiced the same as when I graduated, and we need to embrace all styles for the betterment of the profession.

**Journal:** *Looking beyond the new dentist category, how do we encourage more member involvement in our association from dentists in all*



**Active volunteers** — Dr. Eric Knudsen has served in many posts with organized dentistry, as has Dr. Beth Knudsen. She's been a member of the ADA 9th District delegation and serves on the MDA Foundation Board. (Photos: Holly Nylund.)



### **types of practice situations?**

**Knudsen:** It starts at the component level — we have to ask them to get involved. We were all asked to volunteer at one point, and stepped up. There are so many committees that could use a “seasoned” member’s expertise, and they also need the new dentist perspective. Or the perspective of a DSO dentist, or public health dentist. It’s best to have committees that have a breadth of backgrounds and experience. I strongly encourage members to consider getting involved in some capacity. Everyone’s participation is wanted.

### **Journal: So how did you get involved in organized dentistry, and specifically in leadership? Why did you decide to do that?**

**Knudsen:** It started when I was a new grad working with my father in his practice. He was the current president of Cloverland District, and he encouraged me to be our delegate to the MDA House of Delegates. Dr. Bob Richards, Dr. Gary Asano, and Dr. Clayton Shunk, among others, were very helpful, and I greatly enjoyed the time in our caucus, including learning all the background to a lot of the politics that existed at the MDA House. It always struck me how the atmosphere was so respectful and how the opinions of every person in the caucus were valued. Seeing the professionalism and the power of organized dentistry made me keep coming back year after year.

Once I was on the MDA Board of Trustees, it was the mentorship and encouragement of Dr. Deb Peters, Dr. Margaret Gingrich, and Dr. Todd Christy that helped me take the next steps into leadership roles.

My reasoning for stepping into leadership is that I feel I can help to preserve and promote our profession. From my father to my wife, and now to my son, I feel I have an obligation to give back and do anything I can to help.

When you practice in a smaller community, it becomes such a part of you, kind of like having a very big extended family, which is both good and bad! But that’s something that concerns us as we get older. We want to do everything we can to ensure that our patients are taken care of in the future, after we retire and stop practicing.

### **Journal: Your wife, Beth, is on the MDA Foundation Board. What would you say to members who aren’t familiar with our Foundation, or who haven’t yet contributed to it?**

**Knudsen:** The MDA Foundation is a terrific charity that provides direct financial support that helps many local dental clinics and students — dental, dental hygiene, and dental assistant students. Beth is co-chair of the Grants and Scholarship Committee, which she really enjoys, as she gets to see the beneficiaries of the thoughtful donations made to the Foundation.

### **Journal: As you know, the Foundation’s Mission of Mercy is coming to the Flint area in 2024. Is there a need for a MOM in the U.P.?**

**Knudsen:** We’re excited that the MOM is coming to Flint! That’s Beth’s home town. Her sister, Emily Lieske, with no dental experience by the way, is working with the Foundation’s Anne Berquist on local fundraising options and opportunities. I think a MOM in the U.P. presents several strategic difficulties, geographically, with

a low population density given the large land mass, as well as the small number of dentists. Having said that, I know there are many from across the whole state who would be willing to come up and help. There is a MOM in Green Bay this June, but it’s the same weekend as the U.P. Dental Meeting, and I’m not aware of any local members who are planning to go down to it.

### **Journal: Tell us about your family and some of the things you enjoy outside of dentistry.**

**Knudsen:** Beth and I have two kids. Our oldest, Matt, is starting his senior year at U of M School of Dentistry — he’ll be the third generation of dentists in our family. Our daughter Abigail graduated this April from the College of Engineering at U of M with a degree in chemical engineering. She’s moving out to Golden, Colorado, as she’s accepted a position with Molson Coors.

Beth and I own a small group general dentistry practice in Escanaba, a practice started by my dad, Dr. William Knudsen, in 1968. We have an “up north” cottage near Munising that we try to get to on free weekends. I like to play golf and hunt as time allows, and the fall is also for football — we have U of M season football tickets and we still make it down to Ann Arbor for three or four games per year.

### **Journal: So to conclude, if you had one wish to come true by the end of your year in office, what would it be?**

**Knudsen:** I guess my wish would be that the quality of dental care in Michigan is the best anywhere, available in a timely manner, accessible, and affordable for everyone.

### **Journal: Thank you, Dr. Knudsen, and best wishes for your year as MDA president.**

**Knudsen:** Thank you. I’m looking forward to it. ●