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## Headquarters Report: A Look at Some of the Changes Over the Past 10 Years

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By Karen Burgess, MBA, CAE  
MDA CEO/Executive Director

# A Look at Some of the Changes Over the Past 10 Years

*Transcribed from remarks given May 4 at the MDA House of Delegates.*

**G**ood morning! It's great to be with you here at our Michigan Dental Association House of Delegates. This is my 10th House of Delegates, and I've

been reflecting on how much has changed in the last 10 years. Sometimes it seems as if even the pace of change has accelerated.

Within the dental profession, we've seen:

- The number of U.S. dental schools grow from 65 to 71, and the number of graduates in the graduating class grow by almost 25%.

- Greater diversity among our dental school graduates. Women now make up more than half of the graduating class, and the proportion of dental school graduates who are of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds has also increased.

- Practice choices have increased. Dentistry has a strong tradition of solo practice, but the number of solo practitioners has been falling steadily, and it's now under 50%. More dentists are choosing employment, group practice, and affiliation with a DSO. Ten years ago, about half of dentists in their early 30s were owners. Now it's just 34%.

- Baby boomers are retiring in droves. In 2014, the average age of a practicing dentist was 50. Last year, it was 48.8. With the large number of new grads entering the profession and the exit of the retirees, we can expect the downward trend to continue.

- On the public front, the good news is that more people are getting dental benefits. No matter what the age range, the percentage of insured people is growing. The most recent data shows that 42% of seniors, 77% of adults, and 91% of children have dental benefits. And there is a greater understanding that good oral health is essential for good overall health, which is slowly leading

to greater medical-dental integration.

But the last decade has been hard on organized dentistry. The generational shift and change in practice choices makes the member value proposition a challenge. Over the last 10 years, the ADA's market share dropped from 65.5% to 57.1%. Here at the MDA, our market share has stayed steady. It was 74% 10 years ago, and at year-end 2022 we were at 74.4%.

In addition to the trends within dentistry, we are all impacted by the broader societal trends. Let's take a look at five of the top trends identified by the Pew Research Center and how they align with our experience here in dentistry.

First, the rise of the millennials. They've surpassed the Baby Boomers as the largest generation in the workforce. And Gen Z is coming up hard behind them! We are definitely seeing the impact of generational change.

Second, the growing diversity of the U.S. population. More than half of today's newborns are now of a racial or ethnic minority background. The implication is that dentistry's diversity is only going to grow.

Third, a tight job market. Unemployment is at an unprecedented low. That's definitely true for us in dentistry, with workforce shortages for clinical dental team members, front office workers, and more. Only dentists seem to be in plentiful supply.

The fourth major trend is the explosion of social media. Whether it's Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Linked In, Twitter, Reddit, or Twitch, social media is simply huge. And more than half of adults say that social media is where they get their news.

And of course, the fifth trend is the universal utilization of personal technology. From smartphones to the internet, the fact is that the world is now in our pocket. Think of our expectations these days — we want answers to our questions instantaneously. If a website takes more than a fraction of a second to load, it's too long to wait. Netflix just shut down its DVD delivery service, the last Blockbuster is closed, and Youtube has

emerged as a credible source of useful information — even for dentists. And potential solutions to any problem are just moments away, thanks to the ready availability of artificial intelligence.

So how is the MDA adjusting to all these changes? I'm pleased to say that we've been very focused on looking down the road to anticipate and proactively prepare for the impact of the trends I've mentioned above. Here they are, one by one:

1. The generational trends and changes in practice patterns among today's young dentists mean that we can no longer assume that the products, services, and benefits we provide will suffice, particularly as fewer dentists are solo practitioners. Diversification is the key. We cannot stop meeting the needs of our more-established members, but we must ensure that our value proposition resonates not just today, but into the future. To that end, the MDA hired a research firm that specializes in Generation Z to conduct one-on-one interviews and focus groups. We learned a lot. Key membership pillars for this group include professional growth, personal growth, authentic relationships, and social consciousness — and we'll be putting those learnings into concrete action.

2. When it comes to growing diversity, inclusion is the key. Today's young adults believe that diversity — in all senses — is the norm, and they want to align with organizations that are inclusive and allow all voices to not only be heard, but have an impact. The MDA's collaboration with diverse dental organizations through the Michigan Diverse Dental Alliance, as well as the establishment of the Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, reflects our commitment to this principle, as does the recently revised core values for the Michigan Dental Association, which includes this statement:

*Inclusivity: We work to create an environment where all members and the greater dental community are respected and feel a sense of belonging.*

3. Problem-solving is critical for the tight job market. This is a challenge that I'm sure many of you are facing. As the number of dentists grows and many dental team members have stepped back from working in the dental practice, we are looking at a number of short- and long-term solutions. If we can expand the training opportunity for hygiene and dental assisting while

encouraging licensed dental auxiliaries to come back to practice, we have the potential to bring supply and demand back into balance. You can be sure that there will be more to come on this in the coming months.

4. With the rise of social media came new opportunities for the MDA to connect with members, the broader dental community, and the public. With greater understanding through data analytics, our Public Education Campaign has become even more effective as we've used social media to reach key audiences. The same is true for raising awareness of MDA programs and events. As many members are moving away from email, social media is both a source of entertainment and information. We're even establishing our first online community, a Facebook group for women members who joined the Women in Dentistry community, led by Drs. Debra Peters and Kate Solomich. They also have a monthly meet-up — by Zoom, of course — for education and networking.

5. And investing in technology is mandatory. The pandemic has only accelerated technology's impact, and for the better. As MDA committees meet by Zoom, opportunities to volunteer for busy people — or those who don't live close to the MDA headquarters — have grown. Our catalog of on-demand CE has expanded, helping dentists and their teams get high quality education, conveniently. Looking ahead, you'll soon see a revamp of our MDA website to create a smoother, easier, and more personal experience when you visit. We are looking at a Learning Management System to enhance the online CE experience. And we are pushing for an upgrade to our MDA Connections app to allow for functionality members want, such as paying dues and registering for classes. Plus, the use of new technology will allow us to build a 360-degree view of our members, allowing the MDA to customize your experience based on your wants and needs.

The last 10 years have been tumultuous. I'd bet good money that the future holds more of the same. Listening to members, anticipating change, and maintaining a nimble MDA will help us maintain our position as a best-in-class association.

I appreciate the expertise and commitment of all our MDA staff and volunteers. Thank you for all you do! ●

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