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## President's Address: Dr. Vince Benivegna

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## President's Address: Dr. Vince Benivegna

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is transcribed from Dr. Benivegna's opening remarks to the House of Delegates.

# Dr. Vince Benivegna: "Now It's Up to Us!"

This year, the state of Michigan listened to the MDA and greatly improved Adult Dental Medicaid coverage and reimbursement.

Now, it's up to Michigan dentists to do their part and participate in this program. That's the message from outgoing MDA President Dr. Vince Benivegna in this address delivered to the MDA House of Delegates on Thursday, May 4, during Annual Session.



**Outgoing president** — Dr. Vince Benivegna, of East Lansing, concluded his administrative year at the 2023 MDA meeting.

—Photos by Dave Trumpie.



**G**reetings Michigan Dental Association House of Delegates. Thank you for volunteering to be here today and for the work you are doing on behalf of the dentist members of the MDA. I hope you are having a fun time!

I would like to take a point of personal privilege now and thank some special people that helped get me here as your president and who have supported me along the way. I would like to first thank my lovely wife, Susan, for being my wingwoman as I trekked around Michigan this year doing my presidential visits. Lots of time in the car was spent, not to mention having to hear the same talking points over and over again. Susan has gotten to know so many of you over the years, to the point when I walk into a room I am greeted with, “Hi Vince, great to see you, thanks for coming, where’s Sue?”

Also, I would like to thank my two sons, Matthew and Michael, who are both Michigan State Spartans. In fact, Matthew just graduated. Congratulations again Matthew, I am super proud of you. I wish my parents, Paul and Carolyn, were still here on this earth, because I need to thank them for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams and to persevere against adversity. I would like to thank my oral surgery partners, Dr. Mark Beckman and Dr. Sean Pack, for covering me for all the time I have been out of the office on MDA business and supporting my decision to become MDA president. A big thanks to my office staff for their willingness to be flexible with my dynamic office schedule and helping me to be in the right place at the right time.

Thanks to the MDA staff for helping me make it look easy and for getting me on Instagram, and our wonderful Board of Trustees for getting the work done and making the hard decisions. And a special thanks to former MDA Executive Director Drew Eason, who answered my complaint letter when I got out of residency and started into private practice, and truly showed me the value of organized dentistry and what’s in it for me. And lastly, Dr. Sherill Behnke for giving me my first volunteer assignment for the Central District Dental Society after I complained about the entertainment at the first CDDS Holiday party I attended. She told me if I didn’t like the entertainment, I was in charge of finding next year’s. Then I became CDDS New Dentist chair, and so it began.

Fast forward to my time on the MDA Board. In 2016 I was asked to represent the MDA on Gov. Rick Snyder’s Prescription Drug and Opioid Abuse Commission. A lot of the new regulations and laws regarding opioid prescribing came out of our commission, not to mention that one hour of opioid training you have to take for re-licensure. Well, now it’s six years later, and our profession has led the way and reduced our prescribing more than any other health care profession. I applaud you for that accomplishment.



**Gavel is passed** — Dr. Eric Knudsen took over as MDA president at the close of the House of Delegates on Saturday, May 6.

### How good we have it

My president’s year has been fun and eye-opening. You know, you never know how good you’ve had it until you have something else to compare it to. After I graduated from dental school in 1990, I started a general practice residency in Brooklyn, New York, at Maimonides Hospital. My co-residents went to Columbia’s dental school and Tufts dental school. It didn’t take long to realize that the didactic and clinical knowledge I obtained at U of M put me head and shoulders above my co-residents.

Similarly, I don’t think you can truly realize how outstanding your MDA is until you interact with other state association presidents and presidents-elect. For example, at our Mid-States Meeting I sat next to the president-elect of another state dental association. He had a cardboard-box filing system with him, and he was just itching to show me what he had in those files. He was so proud to show me that he had copied every single page of our MDA website, because he recognized how the things we were doing with advocacy, leadership, mentorship, continuing education, DEI, and membership retention strategies were helping us to be a model state society, with one of the highest member market shares in the nation, one that other states envy. So, you should be proud of being an MDA member.

### Improving Dental Medicaid

A big accomplishment that I’m proud of is the support  
*(Continued on Page 46)*

that we were able to achieve for Adult Dental Medicaid from our governor, Gretchen Whitmer, and the Legislature. There hadn't been an increase in the Dental Medicaid fee schedule in more than 30 years. Well, after a lot of work from our legislative team and their help with me testifying twice in front of the House and Senate appropriations committees on health care, we were able to get an \$85 million infusion into the Dental Medicaid system. Specifically, for Adult Dental Medicaid this accomplished getting the fee schedule reimbursement to the level of the average commercial rate. It also achieved getting additional covered procedures, like endodontic therapy, periodontal therapy, and sealants. So, hopefully more adults in Michigan will be keeping their teeth instead of having them extracted, because that was the only option historically covered by Medicaid.

To give you an idea of how big this accomplishment was, the ADA *Morning Huddle* published an article on how Michigan got it done. And after seeing this published, I got a call from Bill Simon, one of the trustees of the Illinois State Dental Society, wanting to talk to me to find out how we did it, because this is the same thing they have been working on in their state. In fact, he just testified in front of their legislature on May 2. Again, the MDA is leading the way, and other states are trying to emulate us.

### Members urged to participate

So, this is the classic case of “be careful what you wish for.” We asked, and the state of Michigan delivered. Now,



**ADA president-elect** — A highlight of this year's House meeting was an ADA issues presentation by Dr. Linda Edgar. She'll become ADA president in October.

it's up to us to help improve the oral health of Adult Medicaid recipients in our state.

There were many excuses historically about why we didn't want to participate with Medicaid, such as, “I'd lose money if I took it.” Or, “The billing and administrative processes are difficult.” Or, “There's a high patient appointment no-show rate,” or “Medicaid patients are disruptive for my office.” Well, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services has heard our complaints and excuses, and along with the increased funding they are working toward tackling issues like transportation for Medicaid patients, to help them keep their scheduled appointments. Through the use of third-party administrators like Delta Dental and Dentaquest, they've made the billing process as easy as commercial insurance. Many of us already participate with the Healthy Kids Program. Adult Dental Medicaid has basically become the adult analog to the Healthy Kids Program. It smells like commercial insurance and works like it too, and now pays as well.

Choice of plans is something that's important to the feds and state for the benefit of both patients and providers. Dentists have the ability to pick and choose which of the Medicaid plans they will accept, and patients do as well. If dentists have problems or complaints about issues they encounter, they can contact Bill Sullivan at the MDA, who meets regularly with the commercial insurance administrators of these plans. The state will be watching these commercial administrators and will have a scoring and grading system in place, and will award future contracts accordingly. We have a good working relationship with MDHHS, and Bill Sullivan and his staffers Neema Katibai and April Stopczynski can help voice our concerns to them, so that the changes to adult Medicaid can be a success. MDHHS will re-evaluate the fee schedules yearly and update them each year.

I'm not asking you to make your entire practice into a Medicaid practice. But I am asking that you consider getting enrolled and taking some adult patients in the program.

### In line with MDA values

I feel that pitching in to treat this segment of the population aligns with our current Mission, Vision and Values, which by the way were just updated by your MDA Board of Trustees.

This aligns with our *Mission*, empowering member dentists, advancing the dental profession, and improving oral health.

This aligns with our *Vision*, as the MDA is Michigan's recognized expert on oral health. We continue to work with MDHHS to help with oral health recommendations for children and adults in Michigan.

This aligns with our MDA *Values*:

- The Value of Inclusivity — We work to create an en-



vironment where all members and the greater dental community are respected and feel a sense of belonging.

■ The Value of Compassion — We believe that all patients should be treated with empathy and respect.

■ The Value of Service — We are responsive to the changing needs of members and the profession.

■ The Value of Quality Care — We are committed to quality care for all patients.

I believe this is more than an altruistic aspiration. I believe now that we can successfully treat the 25% of Michigan adults who are on Medicaid and maintain profitability, while providing a much-needed service. Previous to this, fewer than 30% of adults on Medicaid have been able to access dental care in Michigan. Preventive dental care has been almost nonexistent in adults, and the number of adults who have one or two treatment visits per year is not much better. More significantly, only 20% of Michigan Medicaid-covered pregnant individuals receive any dental care. This is despite coverage for dental extending one year postpartum. We miss a critical time to educate new parents, and once that child is 1 year old, they usually have not seen the dentist.

I know personally that this works. Before this Medicaid restructuring occurred, I took the Healthy Michigan Plan. In fact, I would guess that it was about 25% of my practice. These adult patients were so happy to have dental insurance compared to straight Medicaid, so that now they could once again afford to see a dentist. I would hear patients say that they hadn't been able to afford to see a dentist for the last 10 years, and now they could finally get all their teeth removed and have dentures made. These were not old patients either. They were most commonly patients in their mid-20s and 30s!

Well, it is my sincere hope that fewer and fewer of these patients will need to have all their teeth extracted



**Meritorious award** — Dr. Benivegna presented former Oakland County Executive Director Dr. John Kamar with the MDA's highest honor, the John G. Nolen Meritorious Award, at the first House session on May 4.

and replaced with dentures. My hope is that with more dentists available to treat them, more routine preventive care and maintenance will be able to take place, so that they will be able to keep their natural dentition — especially considering that, as I mentioned, endodontic treatment, periodontal treatment, and sealants can now be provided.

When I mentioned that I used to participate with the Healthy Michigan Plan, that was because I eventually stopped participating. The reason I dropped out is that originally it was administered by one commercial provider, then later that changed and the fee schedule was cut almost back to straight Medicaid levels. I think MDHHS has gotten the message on this, and adult Medicaid benefits will be administered and reimbursed more uniformly. There is also movement on the federal level that we are supporting to maintain a floor of Medicaid funding for Dental Medicaid.

I am happy to inform you that I have recently applied to once again take adult Medicaid. The fee schedule and other

resources for members are available on a new page on the MDA website. (*At [michigandental.org/Medicaid](http://michigandental.org/Medicaid) — Ed.*) This speech will be published in the *MDA Journal* and the website will provide links to all the information you need to make an informed decision to participate with adult Medicaid. Also, there are two booths here at Annual Session where you can get more information. The MDHHS Oral Health Booth and tomorrow, from 10-4, there will be a table near registration where MDHHS Medicaid staff can answer your questions and help you enroll.

The MDA will continue to have your back and represent you in the best way we know how. You are all participating in that process now at this 2023 House of Delegates, and again I thank you for the work.

Let's have a great House, and Smile On! ●

*Dr. Benivegna, of East Lansing, will continue on the MDA Board of Trustees as immediate past president during the 2023-24 MDA administrative year.*