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ADA Trustee Report: Does the ADA Have a Long-Term Vision for Oral Health in America?

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Does the ADA Have a Long-Term Vision for Oral Health in America?



By Michele Tulak-Gorecki, DDS
ADA 9th District Trustee

Do we? Good question, isn't it? At a recent ADA Board of Trustees meeting we had an interesting discussion revolving around this central question.

Dr. Marko Vujicic, ADA chief economist, and Dr. Ray Cohlma, ADA executive director, led an excellent discussion that came down to three key questions:

1. Given the trend toward large group practice and the generational shift in the member value proposition to include not just tangibles (*value*), but intangibles (*values*), how does the ADA need to proactively adjust?

2. Knowing that in order to get more people to visit the dentist likely requires major expansions and improvements in insurance coverage, as well as more collaboration with primary care providers, do we *really* have a vision of getting more Americans into a dental home?

3. More broadly, how aggressively should the ADA lead the push for dentistry to be truly "essential" and part of the primary care system and for dentists to meaningfully collaborate with primary care providers?

These three questions led to a great discussion, with the outcome being the formation of a Board workgroup charged with exploring the potential actions and recommendations that might arise from this discussion. I was asked to be a member of this workgroup.

Heads in the sand?

You may have heard about or seen the Disney movie *Encanto*. A song in the movie that no one seems to be able to get out of their head is called, "We Don't Talk About Bruno." I could label this workgroup's charge with the same title. For years, we've known about trends in dentistry that tell us we need to not only ask these questions, but answer them — especially for our new dentist colleagues. But, typically, we don't talk about them. And if we do, it's never in a way to make meaningful plans to address any of these issues. Quite honestly, we've all put our heads in the sand. But these are hard questions. They cannot be left unanswered.

If you recall, in the movie Bruno was shunned by the family because his unique gift was to tell the future. The problem was that everyone was afraid of his visions for the future, so they sent him away. One person, Mirabel, the only child who didn't receive a unique gift, discovered that Bruno never really left. He lived inside the house in secret. She eventually finds him when she has visions that the miraculous house the family lives in is cracking at the foundation. Together they save the future of the family, but they all have to work together.

Our dental profession is seeing cracks in its foundation. We have students with unsustainable debt, a generation graduating that doesn't necessarily want to be private-practice owners, worsening insurance reimbursement challenges, and our national dental organization that has been largely reluctant to start a conversation on these aspects of dentistry's future because "We Don't Talk About Bruno."

We don't talk about visions for the future of our profession because it's challenging, and we want to do dentistry the way we learned it. We're afraid. However, the truth is that our upcoming generations want to see changes to make dentistry a profession that embraces the way they are being educated in our dental schools — as a collaborative venture with primary care providers and an "essential" part of the primary care system. We need to listen to these voices and help pave a way for a future for our profession that we all can embrace, and we need to do it together.

We are at a crossroads. It's time for us to have the conversations and create a proactive long-term vision for oral health in America. It won't be easy, but I truly believe it will be worth it. ●

Questions? Comments? Contact Dr. Tulak-Gorecki at tulakgoreckim@ada.org.