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Meet New MDA President Vince Benivegna

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Dr. Vince Benivegna

2022-23 MDA President:

"Dentistry Is a Great Career!"



Get to know Dr. Vince Benivegna, now serving as MDA president for the 2022-23 administrative year. A man of many interests, he's a board-certified oral surgeon in mid-Michigan, a volunteer with an impressive resume, and a strong advocate of the value of organized dentistry for dentists in every age group and practice setting.

Dr. Vince Benivegna, an oral surgeon practicing in East Lansing, became the MDA's 2022-23 president at the second session of the 2022 MDA House of Delegates on Saturday, April 30.

Dr. Benivegna is a volunteer with an impressive record of service and commitment to the profession and patients. He's a past secretary, treasurer, vice president, and president of the Central District Dental Society, and has served the MDA through his work on numerous committees and as a member of the MDA Board of Trustees. During the past year he served as MDA president-elect and headed the MDA delegation to the ADA House of Delegates.

A proud graduate from the University of Michigan School of Dentistry, he's board-certified in oral and maxillofacial surgery. He's a past president of the Michigan Society of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeons, serves as treasurer on the Council on Michigan Dental Specialties, is a Diplomat of the American

Board of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery, and a Fellow of The American College of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons.

Notably, he served as a member and sub-committee chair on Gov. Rick Snyder's Prescription Drug and Opioid Addiction Commission, and frequently presents continuing education courses for the MDA on opioid awareness.

Recently we posed a series of questions to Dr. Benivegna — whose last name, by the way, rhymes with "Pennsylvania." Here are the questions and his answers . . .

Journal: Congratulations on your new position as MDA president. We ask this every year, but as you begin your term, what are your goals for the upcoming administrative year?

Benivegna: Thank you. I'm hoping for a quiet year at the MDA, but I'm readying myself for whatever's thrown at me. Basically,

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I'm looking forward to continuing to complete the goals set forth in our strategic plan, including implementing our digital transformation at the MDA and implementing some new software to customize the member experience with the MDA and to help us engage and communicate with members more effectively. Also, we'll be looking at utilization levels of the services that the MDA is currently offering to make sure that what we're offering actually meets the needs of members, and is being fiscally responsible. And we're also focused on increasing member engagement with our advocacy efforts in Lansing.

Journal: That's quite a list, but a good one. So all that planning aside, what do you see as the state of practice in dentistry here in Michigan right now, after two years of living with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Benivegna: So I think, as the ADA

Health Policy Institute surveys have shown, that we're operating at near pre-COVID capacity in our offices. Dentists have had to do a lot of adapting over the last two years to meet the evolving CDC guidelines and institute office protocols to protect staff and patients, as well as having to deal with supply chain issues and shortages. It's definitely not business as usual compared to pre-COVID-19, but we seem to be busy with plenty of patients to see and are getting back into more of a routine. Personally, my office days are getting to be less of an adventure as we return to the new normal. I think the MDA has done a lot to help members cope with everything the past couple of years.

Journal: That's for sure. So what are some other top challenges Michigan dentists are facing?

Benivegna: Well, number one, staffing shortages remain an issue. It

seems to be a problem in many businesses, not just dentistry. Hopefully, as workers re-enter the market the situation will improve. The ADA and MDA are trying to help this situation, but there's no easy quick fix. It's affecting everyone. Also, there's still difficulty in getting our normal dental supplies. Sometimes you may have to buy a different product than usual to accomplish the same task. So, it's about willingness to adapt.

Journal: What else?

Benivegna: Selling a practice is also a challenge, especially in certain areas of the state. Some of the services that the MDA and ADA offer can make that easier. But there's no doubt that the practice environment is changing, with fewer owner-dentists. It's going to continue to move towards group ownership.

Journal: What about new



At the office — Dr. Benivegna is an oral surgeon, shown here with his staff in his office in East Lansing. Satellite offices are located in the nearby communities of Grand Ledge and Charlotte.

graduates? A lot of them are burdened with very high levels of debt, and many of them are finding it preferable to work for a DSO or group practice rather than pursuing a career as a solo practitioner. There are generational differences among our members, but we know for sure that dentists graduating from dental school are the future of our profession. So what would you say to a new graduate, or a fairly recent graduate? What's your advice to help them get started the right way in a professional career, and how does the MDA fit into all of that?

Benivegna: I think dentistry is a great career. It's super-rewarding personally and professionally, and you can make a good living at it. There are a lot of great, established private and large group practices to choose to work for, depending on the lifestyle you desire. And there's a place in the MDA and in local societies for dentists in all different types of practice situations. Dentistry needs their input and participation.

On a practical basis, I'd encourage a new dentist to take advantage of the services that the MDA has to offer to help with employment contract evaluation, insurance products, and debt consolidation and repayment, or maybe a practice purchase. Also, consider entering the MDA mentorship program. And take advantage of the ADA Contract Analysis Service before signing with a dental benefit plan. Just the basic information that the MDA provides through publications and from the staff is very valuable, especially to a dentist who's just starting out. And of course the ADA has a lot of practical resources too.

Journal: Agreed! Now, on the other side of the coin, since you've been practicing for a number of years now, I'm wondering if you could describe what you see as reasons for a well-established dentist to belong to the MDA and ADA and local society? Do



At home — Benivegna poses with wife Susan, son Michael, and dog Yogi at his Okemos home, not far from MDA headquarters. Not pictured: Son Matthew.

they need association membership as much as the younger dentists? What MDA benefits do you personally take advantage of in your office?

Benivegna: So I've been a member of the MDA for 32 years now. I like keeping current with our profession, and the MDA *Journal* and MDA Connection app help me do that, along with the other MDA print and social media. I also take advantage of the local component and MDA CE offerings to help meet my licensing requirements. Using MDA Insurance

and MDA Services for insurance and dental supplies and other services I need also saves me money. Another important benefit is advocacy. I'm happy to know that the MDA and ADA are in my corner when it comes to big issues like governmental regulation, taxation, and funding of community programs like Healthy Kids Dental. These MDA, ADA, and component offerings benefit dentists of all ages.

Journal: You're an oral surgeon,
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and I'm wondering what your thoughts are in terms of how the MDA gives value to dental specialists as well as general dentists, knowing that most of our members are general dentists.

Benivegna: Again, it goes back to advocacy for me. The MDA was successful in lobbying to get the dental prosthetic tax eliminated and the Cone Beam CAT scanner Certificate of Need requirement removed, which made it easier and more economical for me to install CBCT scanners in my offices. Another valuable benefit that was really nice to have during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic was all of the MDA guidance for our office regarding CDC, OSHA, and MIOSHA recommendations and requirements. It was also a small victory for dentistry to be included as an essential service, and the MDA was a major part of that. Additionally, the MDA helped us be first in line for COVID-19 vaccine doses.

Journal: On another note, many of our members know you served on the governor's opioid task force, and have given presentations on opioid addiction. What's the current situation in terms of the opioid crisis? Is it improving, or getting worse?

Benivegna: It was really an eye-opener for me to be on the Prescription Drug and Opioid Abuse Commission from 2016 to 2018. It changed the way I prescribe for pain control, and through our efforts I don't think dentists prescribe many opioids any more. Although dentistry is doing its part in helping with the opioid crisis, there's still work to be done in other medical fields. There was some recent evidence of opioid overdose and death numbers decreasing beginning in 2018, but the COVID-19 pandemic eclipsed that progress, and the curve again is on a steep upward trajectory. This is mostly due to increased abuse of illicit, non-prescribed synthetic opioids

such as fentanyl, which is mixed with heroin in a deadly combination.

Journal: That's frightening stuff. I know you presented on opioids at this year's Annual Session.

Benivegna: Yes. I hope we can continue to make progress on this, because the opioid epidemic has a high human cost.

Journal: Getting back to organized dentistry — establishing and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion is priority for the MDA right now, and the ADA as well. How are we doing? What can we do to do better? We've received some push-back from some members on this — are we being "politically correct"?

Benivegna: To quote Jane Addams from the series Great Ideas of Western Man, "Civilization is a method of living, an attitude of equal respect for all men." I believe it's really not so much about being politically correct, it's more about doing the right thing. Who could be opposed to being a little introspective and learning how to make it more fun for all of us to play nice in the sandbox? Our newly formed DEI committee is working on breaking down some long-held barriers. The MDA has also supported bias awareness. These efforts will make dentistry a better profession, and the MDA a more relevant and effective organization. Even the science shows us that increasing diversity in an organization increases creativity and productivity. So, I think we're on the right path.

Journal: I wonder if you could give us your perspective on organized dentistry, volunteer leadership, and maybe some thoughts on why the MDA seems to be meeting the challenges that are out there, as reflected by our strong membership?

Benivegna: Sure. Believe it or not, I got involved in organized dentistry because I complained about the



Longtime practitioner — Dr. Benivegna has been in practice more than 30 years. He's shown here examining a patient chart. (Photos by Dave Trumpie.)

entertainment selection for our holiday party at the Central District. Well, wouldn't you know, for the next year's holiday party I was put in charge of the entertainment. From there I became the Central District New Dentist Chair, and then I just got hooked into having a hand in organized dentistry. For me, my involvement in organized dentistry comes from wanting to be involved in effecting change, and also as an outlet to give back to the profession that's provided so much for my family and me.

Journal: So what's a good way for someone to get started volunteering for organized dentistry — other than complaining about the entertainment at a party?

Benivegna: I would urge young dentists to get involved with small bites at first. Be a host at a CE event, or volunteer to serve on a committee or task force, or help out at a meeting. Applying for the MDA LEAD program is a super way to develop your leadership skills and eventually get more involved at a higher level. I think other members will find as I have that the MDA is full of great people, and it's helped me grow personally and professionally.

Journal: Tell us a little about your family, what you do in your spare time, how you maintain work/life balance with so much going on?

Benivegna: Where do I start? I have so many irons in the fire. First off, let me say I have an awesome wife, Susan, and two super long-haired boys, Matthew and Michael, and a dog, Yogi, that keep me going on a daily basis. Matthew is a junior at Michigan State University and Michael is a senior at Okemos High School.

My office staff and two oral surgery partners are the best, too, and make it easy to be an oral surgeon. My personal life is filled with a lot of Alpine skiing, racing, and ski coaching and

officiating in the winter at the high school and USSA level. During the summer I run a 32-member golf league mostly consisting of dentists, so if you have a dental problem on a Wednesday afternoon in the Lansing area you might be out of luck. Also, in the summer I manage 160 acres of hunting land in Northern Michigan, and do a fair amount of gentleman farming. There's nothing better than being outside and getting your hands dirty! I enjoy hunting deer and deer camp in November. And then during the pandemic I learned to turkey hunt, so I have one more thing to keep me busy in the spring and fall.

With my family this summer we'll be taking a trip to Italy, which was postponed for the last two years, also because of the pandemic. So, I look forward to learning more about my Italian heritage. As you can see my life is not all work and no play, and it's that balance that allows me to continue living the dream!

Journal: Vince, any other personal thoughts you'd like to convey?

Benivegna: I'm really looking forward to my year as MDA president. I can't do it alone, though, and everybody has to do a little bit of the rowing. Maybe for some of our readers that means answering a Text to Action alert from the MDA to help with a legislative dental issue, or maybe applying for a spot in the LEAD program, or taking advantage of one or more of the services offered by the MDA, or helping out at your local component level with a few hours of your volunteer time. All of our members have unique qualities they can bring to the table to continue to make our MDA the best professional organization.

Journal: Good thoughts, for sure. Any last words before we wrap this up?

Benivegna: Yes — Smile on! And I'm thankful for the opportunity to serve. ●



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