



The time is now for dentists

Building our capacity in diversity, equity, and inclusion to better serve our patients and to be more effective leaders in health

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For many people, 2020 was a watershed year for witnessing how inequities and disparities add to morbidity and risk of mortality from disease and violence. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among other people; the rise in violence against Asian, Muslim, and Jewish people; and the unnecessary deaths of people around the globe to COVID-19 have led many people to build their awareness of social and political determinants of health and to take action for more inclusive policies and practices to address inequities. The oral health care community has responded to the pandemics of racism and hate with special journal issues devoted to antiracism¹ and to diversity and inclusion,² organizational policy statements,³⁻⁵ a diversity and inclusion strategic plan for the American Dental Association,⁶ and state dental association resolutions and committees focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The time is now for dentists to become more involved in DEI. To help build our capacity for action, The Journal of the American Dental Association (JADA) is curating content to support our collective learning. Invited oral health care practitioners from a variety of specialties, lived experiences, and expertise will provide content so that we can

- increase our breadth and depth of DEI knowledge
- implement changes in our personal and professional practices that may improve patient outcomes and experiences
- promote belonging in our practices and professional organizations to support the strongest oral health voice for advocacy
- equip ourselves to understand and evolve as society becomes more diverse

In 2021, JADA issued a call to action in an important commentary from Wright and colleagues,⁷ in which they stated

Our diversity is what makes us such an interesting collage of people. It is more than the sum of our unique parts that collectively embodies humanity. There are many benefits of having diversity in the dental profession workforce and leadership, including helping address racial and ethnic health care disparities, improving patient and community-centered care, and enriching the pool of policy makers.

Promoting DEI is our work, and we must answer the collective call to action from Wright and colleagues.⁷ The ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct⁸ includes the principle of Justice (“fairness”):

This principle expresses the concept that professionals have a duty to be fair in their dealings with patients, colleagues, and society. Under this principle, the dentist’s primary obligations include **dealing with people justly and delivering dental care without prejudice**. In its broadest sense, this principle expresses the concept that the dental profession should actively seek allies throughout society on specific activities that will help improve access to care for all. [*emphasis added*]

WHY DOES DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION MATTER FOR OUR PRACTICE?

As practicing dentists, we must practice justice without prejudice, which means that our collective and individual practice must center on DEI. Although there are laws that prohibit discrimination, there are no laws that prohibit bias informing prejudice that shows up in our profession’s clinical practice, education, research, and policy. Whether in the coded language that is used to describe certain types of patients by insurance type or assumptions that are made about communities and populations, bias may inhibit one’s ability to practice the principle of Justice. In this regard, strengthening the profession’s commitments to DEI may allow dentistry to be a more effective leader

Commentaries represent the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the American Dental Association.

in preventing and eliminating diseases among historically minoritized populations, improving access to care by providing dental homes for marginalized communities, and developing a workforce to meet all the oral health care needs confronting this nation.

DEFINING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

The DEI terms are used rather broadly in public health, professional practice, and education. To support collective learning, the following definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion from the American Dental Education Association Faculty Diversity Toolkit⁹ are offered:

Diversity: “Recognizes that each individual is unique with multiple dimensions of diversity that intersect, whether seen or unseen, and that society and community life benefit from the engagement of these differences regardless of culture, values, beliefs, race, ethnicity, language, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, military/veteran status, disability, religion, economic status, geography, or other characteristics or ideologies.”¹⁰

Equity: “The fair treatment, access, opportunity and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that there are historically underserved and underrepresented populations and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is needed to assist in the provision of adequate opportunities to all groups.”¹¹

Inclusion: “The practice of leveraging diversity to ensure individuals can fully participate and perform at their best. Inclusion is a shared responsibility of everyone within the community. An inclusive environment values differences rather than suppressing them; promotes respect, success, and a sense of belonging; and fosters well-being through policies, programs, practices, learning, and dialogue.”¹⁰

These definitions support our understanding, but for these concepts to have their desired impact we must

decide how we will engage these concepts. How does DEI show up in your personal and professional life, and specifically in your practice? What role does DEI have in your professionalization? How much of your continuing education for your practice and professional development is devoted to DEI?

CONCLUSIONS

The content that will appear in JADA is intended to support, inform, and foster deep reflection on these topics. The content is to be a starting point and not an end. As readers and authors, we are entering a brave space in our learning and professional development. Although readers may find the content to be challenging, the intent is for this addition to JADA to be provocative, broaden our understanding, and inspire us to make changes. Now is the time for us to embrace being uncomfortable, to be open to self-evaluation, and to commit to making changes. Whether in conversations in study clubs or dental society meetings, we must be brave, accept that past practices may not serve us well today, and be open to doing what is right and needed for today. Albert Einstein is credited with this often-quoted statement: “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” The time is now to take action and advance DEI. ■

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