



## My View

BY LAILA HISHAW, D.D.S.

**W**hen I earned my degree in dentistry, I was one of only a handful of students of color in my graduating class. That was 20 years ago.

Diversity in my chosen field rose to the top of my mind again recently, when I came across this statistic from the ADA Health Policy Institute<sup>1</sup> that said, “Only 3.8% of all dentists in the U.S. are Black, only 5.2% are Hispanic and a mere 1.1% are American Indians, Alaska Natives or Pacific Islanders.”

I was shocked by these numbers. It has been two decades since I graduated from dental school, yet it is as if nothing has changed. I felt I had to do something to help students of diverse backgrounds see dentistry as a profession that is available to them. I put out an informal post on my personal Facebook page. I shared the statistic in bold letters and wrote, “According to the American Dental Association, 3.8% of all dentists are Black. We need to raise that number! Whose kid may I mentor?”

The response was overwhelming. People were commenting, sharing and tagging their friends.

“Can you mentor my niece?”

“Can you speak to my granddaughter?”

“My son wants to go into medicine. Do you think dentistry would be right for him?”

I realized that if we really want to see a change via increased representation in dentistry, it is too late if we wait until students are in college. They have either made up their minds or have taken subjects that have already put them on a different curriculum path.

An idea sparked in me to develop a Facebook community to share resources, provide guidance and mentoring, and named it Diversity in Dentistry Mentorships. When it comes to the future of dentistry, we need to help young people realize their potential. We need to guide them, inspire them and show them professional and community leaders who look like them.

### Why diversity in dentistry matters

Studies show that minority patients are more likely to visit medical professionals from their own communities. Without dentists of color, minority groups often go without the dental care they need.

Much of this has to do with cultural understanding and trust — or lack thereof. Regaining the trust from Black communities, particularly in older populations, is necessary due to the historical unethical betrayal by government agencies. One example of this is the Tuskegee

# Why diversity in dentistry matters — and how you can help



Syphilis Study.<sup>2</sup> (From 1932–1972, the U.S. Public Health Service conducted a study of the effects of untreated syphilis in Black men in Macon County, Alabama, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Researchers recruited nearly 400 men with late latent syphilis and studied them. According to a CDC FAQ, the study “became unethical in the 1940s when penicillin became the recommended drug for treatment of syphilis and researchers did not offer it to the subjects.” Because of this study, federally supported studies using human subjects now must be reviewed by Institutional Review Boards and researchers now must get voluntary informed consent from all persons taking part in studies.)

Patients in diverse communities may also face challenges that do not affect other demographics or those with better resources and greater privilege. A patient might need to take three different buses to their appointment if there is no dentist in their area, or a language barrier might result in miscommunication about dental hygiene or what a patient can eat or drink before a dental surgery.

Minorities are also more at risk for oral health problems. The CDC show that African Americans and Hispanics have significantly greater rates of untreated cavities and tooth loss than non-Hispanic whites.

If more communities had dental professionals who looked like them, would they be more willing and able to access the dental care they need? I believe so. That is why I am passionate about educating young people of diverse backgrounds about careers in dentistry and why I feel compelled to share this issue with my colleagues of all backgrounds.

### Representation makes a difference

I firmly believe that representation matters. Consider Kamala Harris, the first female U.S. vice president who also happens to be Black and of Asian descent. She is a role model to young people everywhere, especially girls and young people of color. Someone who looks like them has achieved one of the highest offices in the country.

When young people see that, it can spark inspiration and unbridled ambition. I have witnessed it firsthand. I remember one day in my busy pediatric dental practice when I caught a glimpse of my new patient coming through the door. She was a wide-eyed 4-year-old, clinging tightly to her mother’s leg, clearly timid about what to expect at the dentist. Her mom pointed to all the “big kids” in the dental chairs, and,

as I washed my hands, I overheard her say, “And that’s your dentist, Dr. Hishaw.” With that cue, I turned and knelt to greet my young patient face to face. She studied me for a moment before smiling the biggest smile and saying, “You have curls just like me!”

For this young Black girl, seeing a dentist who looked like her — with tight, kinky curls pulled back in a ponytail — set her at ease and established a natural connection. It showed her that there are people like her in the world of dentistry. For all we know, it gave her a vision of what she could be one day.

### Where to go from here

My vision for Diversity in Dentistry Mentorships is to mentor minority young people and help them see dentistry as a career option. Many young people do not have professionals in their lives they can look up to. No one lights the way by advising them on which subjects to take. Dentistry may not even be on their radar. Less than 15% of dental students come from underrepresented backgrounds, according to 2019 data from ADEA.<sup>3</sup>

Helping these young people by offering connections and conversations with existing leaders in dentistry can make such a difference. There are many barriers to entry, be it systemic racism, lack of awareness of career paths, lack of mentorship or financial insecurity. Dental school applications alone can be as much as \$410 if you apply to just two schools. Many prospective students cannot afford to apply to multiple institutions, and consequently, their chances of admission fall well below those with greater financial resources.

One of the ways we plan to reach young people is through partnerships with the non-profit, U.S. Dream Academy, a national after-school mentoring program for at-risk youth founded by Wintley Phipps and supported by luminaries such as Oprah Winfrey and Gen. Colin Powell. We have partnered with them and have recently completed a five-week virtual mentoring program. It has been a great success and very poignant. When I asked how many of the kids had met a Black doctor, only one out of the class of 10 raised their hand. Reaching children early is a key factor in steering them towards meaningful vocations. It allows them to dream and really envision the possibilities.

The other pillar of Diversity in Dentistry Mentorships focuses on pre-dental students — young people who are already interested in dentistry but who could really use a guiding voice. Minority students often feel a constant

burden to prove they are worthy of being in the field and many young people of color do not have role models to help them feel represented.

### How you can help

The way I see it, positive mentoring offers a solution to the disproportionate number of Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Native or Pacific Islander dentists. We need to strengthen and lengthen the pipeline, starting earlier to show them how to dream.

Diversity in Dentistry Mentorships is currently made possible by volunteers alone. Our grassroots efforts are taking shape, but we need more help. Mentors come from all backgrounds, and you do not have to be a minority to be a mentor. We have connections with many young people just waiting to hear from professionals in the dental field willing to volunteer their time, share their stories and guide them to success.

Mentoring can bring about meaningful connections to the community, which is exceptionally rewarding for both parties. Mentoring also helps young people feel seen and heard. It helps them know that they matter and that they have a voice.

Our mentors help by staying in contact via video chats, calls and text messages to mentees and providing guidance on which classes to take, reviewing their personal statement, how to get involved in leadership opportunities in school, and so much more. Sign up to be a mentor at <https://diversitydentistry.org>.<sup>4</sup>

If you do not have the time, consider donating financially to the organization. We have purchased DAT Prep resources and want to provide more relief to students facing financial barriers. In 2021, Diversity in Dentistry Mentorships Inc. became a 501(c)(3) organization. This designation allows us to amplify our voice with more credibility and ultimately reach more potential mentors and donors. Plus, all donations are now tax-deductible. To donate to Diversity in Dentistry Mentorships, visit PayPal.<sup>5</sup>

I envision Diversity in Dentistry Mentorships growing through scholarships, donations, workshops, youth summits and more. This is only the beginning, but every person we impact matters. If we can increase the dental school applicant pool of underrepresented students, surely the faces of dentistry will reflect that of our nation’s ever-increasing diversity. I do not know whether that young, curly-haired patient of mine will become a dentist one day. I hope she will consider it. Regardless, I am sure she will never forget how it felt to see a Black female dentist who looked just like her. Hopefully, that type of representation makes a difference in how she views her opportunities for the future.

**Dr. Hishaw is a pediatric dentist and fellow of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry who practices in Tucson, Arizona.**

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5. To donate via PayPal: [https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/diversitydentistry?locale.x=en\\_US](https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/diversitydentistry?locale.x=en_US).