

## Black, White and Everything In Between: The Importance of Building Cultural Competency within the Dental Profession

by Cathy Hung, DDS, FAAOMS



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The recent, unfortunate event of George Floyd's death with the following #BlackLivesMatter movement lifted the scab that never quite fell off from America. The infrastructure may be rebuilt at some point, but the hurt will continue to linger much longer. According to the U.S. Census data, by 2044, there will not be one single major ethnicity in America. As America is getting more diverse by the day, what can we, as dental professionals, do to help to enhance diversity and inclusion within our own profession?

I like to use a box of puzzles to describe diversity and inclusion. Imagine we are all loose pieces of puzzles which come in different colors and shapes. Diversity describes anything that sets us apart from one another: age, gender, race, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, religious practice, and even upbringing. It is easy to buy a box of puzzles with loose pieces sitting in the box, but it takes much more effort to fit all loose pieces together. The active, ongoing effort putting towards fitting the puzzle pieces describes inclusion. As you can see, inclusion is a much harder and bigger job.

Currently, there is still health disparity within the dental profession. In the upcoming August issue of OMS Clinics of America, Global Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, Dr. Shahid Aziz compared the current U.S. demographic to demographics within the dental and medical profession on racial and gender disparities. There is an under-representation of Blacks and Hispanics. The 2018 U.S. racial demographics showed 13.4% Blacks and 18.3% Hispanics, together representing 31.3% of the U.S. population. The 2018-2019 post graduate dental residents consisted of 8.6% Hispanic and 4.3% Blacks, totaled only 12.9%.

Studies showed that patients are more likely to seek providers of their same, or similar ethnic background, cultural heritage or religious practice. When patients are not seeking care due to the healthcare disparity, delayed diagnosis or treatment occurs. Dental professionals may end up seeing more terminal cases, which are unfortunate and often can lead to increased healthcare costs to the patients and to the healthcare system.

Coastal states are in general more diverse as these states are often the first stops where immigrants land. In fact, Adam McCann in his 2019 Wallet Hub article, "The Most and Least Diverse States in America" had ranked the State of Texas as the second most diverse state in America, with California being the first. As dental professionals treating persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) who might have different skin color, cultural heritage and religious background, oftentimes patients may see us as being different and take a step back. As dental professionals, it is important to reach out and establish rapport with your patients, especially when translation is involved.

Here, I would like to share some strategies with you to help build a more culturally-friendly atmosphere in your workplace:

- 1. Know the demographics that you serve.** If your cultural background is drastically different from the demographic that you serve, I would recommend that you do some research or readings on your own to understand the demographics and culture.
- 2. Work on your non-verbal skills and develop cultural sensitivity regarding your volume and tone of voice, as well as your personal distance, which is very important in certain cultures.** In many Asian, Southeastern and Middle eastern cultures, for example, there is generally a larger personal distance, especially between men and women, as compared to other Western cultures.
- 3. Avoid stereotypical jokes on cultural groups with whom you are not familiar.** This is especially important if you work with a culturally diverse team.
- 4. Avoid "You all look the same" comments.** Bear in mind, that one single country may consist of people speaking very different languages. For example, India has 22 official languages. On the other hand, one language can be spoken by natives of many different countries--think Spanish.
- 5. For those who work in a culturally diverse environment, I recommend celebrating cultural holidays.** Lunar New Year, Diwali, Cinco-de-Mayo, to name a few, are meaningful events where everyone can celebrate. I recommend bringing lots of ethnic food!
- 6. In light of COVID-related furloughs and lay-offs: if you are rebuilding your team, make an effort to make your new team members and existing team members feel welcomed.** Learn about their origins and their stories. It is no longer enough to say "I have someone who speaks Spanish working in my office."

Between Blacks and Whites, there is a spectrum of colors in between. As dental professionals, we can, and should learn not to tolerate, but to embrace, our differences living in America where we call home.

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*Dr. Hung's recently published book, "Pulling Wisdom: Filling the gaps in cultural competency for healthcare professionals," is available on Amazon and will be used as a reference text by Professor Julie Bencosme, the President of the New York Chapter of Hispanic Dental Association, in her upcoming Fall Semester Dental Hygiene program.*

