

## Diversity & Inclusion: Where Do Women Fit In?

by Katie Stuchlik, DDS



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If you asked any dental student today, “Who are Lucy Taylor Hobbs and Emeline Roberts Jones?” you would most likely be met with blank stares. History of dentistry isn’t exactly a dental student’s top priority, however, these two women forged the way for 55% of this year’s freshman class at the University of Texas School of Dentistry.<sup>1</sup> Emeline Roberts Jones became the first woman to practice dentistry in the United States and Lucy Taylor Hobbs was the first female to graduate from a dental college.<sup>2</sup> As the number of female dentists grows, some challenges still remain, including gender bias, wage gap, lower levels of interest in leadership positions, and physical differences.

### GENDER BIAS

Since 1978, the number of female dental school graduates has increased by nearly five.<sup>3</sup> There’s no doubt dentistry is an attractive profession for females, yet it comes with its own set of struggles, particularly, gender bias. Research has shown that human nature adheres to descriptive gender stereotypes and prescriptive gender stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> A descriptive gender stereotype is the way we typically define a certain group, and a prescriptive gender stereotype is how a group should behave. Because only 33.4% of dentists in the United States are female<sup>5</sup>, many female dentists have experienced the unfortunate situation of being mistaken for the assistant or hygienist. A descriptive stereotype causes



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society to believe that women are assistants and hygienists and men are doctors. A prescriptive stereotype in dentistry may look as though women cannot be both successful business owners and moms and spouses. These labels society places on women can be disruptive to the success of female dentists. As more women graduate dental school, improvement in this bias is inevitable.

### WAGE GAP

In general, it may seem nearly impossible for a female dentist to not have the same ability to earn as much as male counterparts. According to a 2017 JADA Article<sup>6</sup>, women dentists earn 65% of what male dentists earned. The study observed obvious differences such as the age difference of men vs. women in the workforce and practice ownership, however nearly two-thirds of the earnings gap was considered “unexplained.” These statistics also account for pay per hours worked. There is evidence that female dentists tend to focus on preventative, less surgical procedures that are reimbursed at lower rates. Another reason for the wage gap, though tough to find concrete data, is women might charge lower fees<sup>7</sup> than their male colleagues or accept lower offers in associateships straight from school. More research in this area could be helpful, though the gap is shrinking over time as more women enter the profession.

### LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

The greatest opportunity to create change is for women to continue to pursue leadership roles in organized dentistry, in dental education, and in practice life. One obstacle to pursuing leadership roles may be a lack of networking in early post-graduate years. The traditional networking may not appeal to female dentists due to home and family commitments, according to former American Dental Association President Dr. Carol Gomez Summerhays.<sup>8</sup> From a crowdsourcing opinion, many women spend eight years focusing on achieving their desired career goals and postpone their personal lives. Shortly into their career, there is an opportunity to focus beyond professional goals which may inhibit a desire to attend meetings and networking events.

### PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES

One of the biggest, and oddly overlooked, differences between women and men is pregnancy. The challenges that arise from pregnancy while practicing dentistry are innumerable. From a physical standpoint, other than the obvious growth, carpal tunnel is a prevalent condition in pregnancy that can affect the ability of a dentist to practice. These physical challenges may tie in to the differences in procedures performed by male and female dentists.<sup>9</sup> From a mental standpoint, pregnancy and postpartum hormones can wreak havoc on even the most unsuspecting female. The American Dental Association recognizes these issues and began taking steps this year to offer support to pregnant dentists and those that employ pregnant dentists. The ADA created a series of webinars this summer discussing issues pertaining to women,<sup>10</sup> as well as published an entire resource guide on the ADA website on pregnancy.<sup>11</sup>

## PERSONAL STORIES

There are differences in opinions on these topics across levels of experience, specialties, and practice life. Gender disparities are even more prevalent in specialty practices.

**Shelley Seidel, D.D.S., M.D.** states that though more women practice dentistry as a whole, not much has changed in the Oral and Maxillofacial community.

“Women don’t hold leadership positions within the specialty,” she mentions, “And when I go to a large CE meeting, I still get asked what doctor I work for.”



**Melissa Brown, D.D.S., F.A.G.D.** states her biggest challenge is being mistaken as somebody other than the doctor. “I have had a number of patients ask me mid-procedure when the doctor will be coming in to take a look,” she states. Like many of the women interviewed for this article,

Dr. Brown mentioned some of the auxiliary team members she’s worked with have treated her differently due to her age and gender.

“I always felt that if I’d been older or if I were a male, she would have treated me with more respect than she did,” she explains regarding a former dental assistant in her early career.



**Lindsey Wendt, D.D.S., F.A.G.D.** recently returned to practice after a pregnancy. Her biggest pregnancy challenge was the daily chiropractor visits for her back and hand issues.

Dr. Wendt mentions managing her patients through consistent pain in her fingers. “When I returned to work, it was a struggle to find a time to pump, even with a hands-free pump,” she mentions.



**Kathy O’Keefe, D.D.S., M.S.** believes there are opportunities for both men and women to succeed in dentistry based on personal goals.

Dr. O’Keefe began her career in academics while raising her children. After twenty years in academics, she moved into an associate-ship in private practice.

“I find that patients seem to feel more comfortable with a female dentist and have told me that they think women dentists tend to be more gentle than men.”

Dr. O’Keefe feels women need to be more insistent in negotiating contracts to reduce any earning gap. “Women need to learn to not



settle for a situation where they don’t have enough control over their own destiny,” she states. As the 2020-2021 President of the Greater Houston Dental Society,

Dr. O’Keefe believes the best part of being a woman in dentistry right now is that we are quickly becoming leaders in dentistry.



## REFERENCES

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