

Organized Dentistry as a Foundation for Practice

TEXT: Dr. Michael Meru

4,380...You must be saying to yourself, "What a random way to start this article." Well, let me get to the point. It will take me 4,380 days, or 12 years, of post-high-school training to be allowed to practice as an orthodontist. Broken down that is 5 years of undergraduate college at an American university, 4 years of dental school, and 3 years of orthodontic training.

My Aims, My Way

Years ago, when I decided I wanted to enter the dental profession, I did so with two main goals in mind: first, to have a career in which I have enough income to provide a good living for my family and have time to spend with my children, and second, to have a skill set that I can use to give something back to those who were less fortunate than me. A quote by William Penn truly shaped the way I went about my dental training. He said, "I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again." Upon matriculating at the University of Southern California School of Dentistry, I sought ways to become a good dentist,

while at the same time giving back to humanity and the profession. It was then that I was introduced to organized dentistry and to the American Student Dental Association (ASDA) and American Dental Association (ADA). The missions of these two organizations include protecting the public's oral health, advancing the profession and maintaining the highest standards of ethics and professionalism.

Our Mission

That said, as I looked around my community, country, and the world, I saw that in our own microcosm of dentistry, there were crises occurring that needed to be addressed. There were millions of children who were not receiving care, people were coming down with lethal cases of oral cancer that could have been solved with

a simple oral cancer screening, governments with no dental knowledge were regulating how the profession of dentistry was to be practiced, and some dentists were treating their patients as a means to an end and not an end in and of themselves. Initially this saddened me, but I became hopeful as I saw others who recognized the same issues and were fighting to resolve them through organized dental groups like ASDA, the ADA, the European Dental Student Association (EDSA) and others. I signed on as a volunteer with both ASDA and the ADA and was fortunate to spend six years as a student volunteer in those organizations. The experiences I gained while serving have laid the foundation for the way I want to practice for the rest of my life. The times I was able to sit down with congressmen in Washington DC, go on dental mission trips to East Los Angeles and all the way to Central America, brainstorm with other leaders on how to solve the barriers-to-care dilemma, participate in the drafting of a white paper on ethics in dental education, etc...have shown me that participation in such efforts isn't just another way to pad a resume, it actually can make a difference and change not only the way the profession is practiced, but it can change a patient's life for the better.

What Organized Dentistry gave me

As I prepare to venture into private practice several months from now, my involve-



ment in organized dentistry has made the road ahead much clearer and easier to tackle. And involvement in organized dentistry doesn't stop the day I graduate, it must continue. If we don't shape the way dentistry is to be practiced, someone else will, and more often than not that person won't be an advocate for patients or the profession. Hopefully each one of us will give back to organized dentistry for altruistic reasons, though one side effect of volunteerism that I was not prepared for was all of the personal gain that came through the efforts. As I worked with different leaders across my country, I found that job offers, patient referrals and other opportunities came in abundance. Not only that, but I found that I was happier and that my demeanor in life was much more positive.

Sorry for almost getting "preachy" there, but, bringing it back down to earth, each



one of us is extremely fortunate to be part of the dental profession. We have careers that enable us to make a great living and to help our fellow men to have better lives. That is really cool, and I guarantee you a lot of people would love to be in our shoes. So wherever your professional pursuits may lead you, remember how fortunate you are and look to get involved in organized dentistry—if you do, the profession, your patients and you will all benefit.

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