

Address of the Incoming President
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Mr. Speaker, Colleagues, Fellow Leaders, and Distinguished Guests:

It's an honor to stand here as the 161st President of the American Dental Association. This is a proud moment for me, and one that I don't take lightly.

Years ago, I never imagined I'd be here, leading this incredible organization. Yet here I am — coming from rock bottom to President of the ADA — representing what I consider the best profession in the world.

I dream big. I live in a realm where anything is possible. My life is proof that truly anything is.

I believe the same for our ADA, especially now, at this pivotal moment in time.

My theme for the year will be the Power of Now.

The choices we make now will greatly affect our future.

Dentistry is changing ... we have a younger, more diverse workforce. There are more pathways to practice, and consumerism and patient expectations have never been greater.

The integration of primary care and dental care is gaining traction... reconnecting the mouth to the body in a way that truly serves our patients— and we need to lead this effort!

We also face challenges like huge gaps in access to care.

Half of American adults don't visit the dentist in any given year...
and nearly a quarter can't afford to...even when they need it.

I know trends like these can feel uncomfortable and bring uncertainty. But remember... the ADA is the biggest lever in our profession, and it's up to us to seize this moment — the power is in the now — to shape a brighter future for everyone.

When we are at our best, we impact the lives of our patients in so many ways. Like my

patient John Alexander, who I had the privilege of treating eight years ago. His story is a powerful reminder of how transformative our work can be.

John sold newspapers near my office to raise money that funded homeless shelters in Denver. Even though John was homeless too, he had a glow about him and he always greeted everyone with his gapped tooth smile.

But behind that smile, he was struggling. His past years in his addiction forced him to live on the streets. This had taken a toll on his teeth. Even though his circumstances were not ideal, he emitted this constant positive energy. He was known as the “Mayor” of our neighborhood. Everyone knew him and loved him.

When John came to me, I removed all of his teeth and gave him a new set of dentures. With his new smile, John said he finally felt like a new person, and he was able to fully express his happiness again. The scars of his addiction on his face were finally healed and he felt whole.

In my experience, when we transform smiles, we transform lives.

That’s the kind of impact we have as dentists — we give people a reason to smile and a chance to be their best selves. There’s nothing better than watching a patient’s face light up enabling their souls to shine through.

This is why I’m so passionate about our work and the future of dentistry. Together, we can make meaningful change... one patient... one step at a time.

As an endurance athlete, I’ve learned the power of taking one step at a time to achieve my goal, no matter how insurmountable the distance or task may seem.

When I did my first Ironman race...

After swimming 2.4 miles in the ocean...

After riding 112 miles on the hot lava fields of Hawaii battling wind and conquering hills....

After 8 hours of effort – it was time to start my marathon... I was tired!

There is NO WAY I could run a marathon at that point.

But I could run one mile. Then there would be an aid station where I can refuel and get hydrated.

Then I knew I could run another mile. At the end of that mile, there would be another aid station.

I took it one step at a time... one mile at a time... until I reached the finish line.

Completing many marathons and Ironman races has taught me the importance of focusing on the mile that I'm in.

I've also learned that these races were not just about physical endurance— they were about mental strength, teamwork, and a commitment to the cause that carries us forward.

These are the same principles that I bring to my presidency.

Dentistry, in many ways, is facing its own Ironman race—a challenge that tests our resolve and demands our best. But just like in any race, where we place our focus will determine our success.

This year, I want to focus on three key areas: promoting wellness, fostering a culture of respect, and integrating oral health within primary care.

To me, wellness is where it all begins.

As dentists, our responsibility goes beyond caring for our patients—we need to care for each other and, most importantly, we need to take care of ourselves.

My commitment to wellness began after I had sunk to the depths of addiction. I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for a call I made to the Michigan Dental Association's well-being program. That call saved my life and set me on a path to recovery.

I take my recovery one day at a time...and I'm grateful to everyone who has walked this path with me — one step at a time. Many of you are here in this room today.

I'm extremely grateful to share that yesterday, I celebrated 9,496 days of continuous sobriety.

If you do the math, that's 26 years.

In sobriety, I learned about persistence, about resilience, and how to focus on what's important.

I learned true gratitude and love.

And learned my purpose.

I am a catalyst for positive change in the world. And I align all my actions with this purpose.

I do it in my recovery

I do it in my athletics

I do it as a dentist

And I will continue to do it as a leader of this fine organization.

Throughout my journey, I've worked with many colleagues who were also struggling — whether with substance abuse, or mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, and burnout.

In the last 20 years, anxiety rates among dentists have tripled, with younger dentists facing higher levels of stress and depression. Over 80 percent of dentists report "major" stress, and nearly 60 percent are considering career changes or early retirement — these are trends we cannot ignore.

I personally know about a dozen suicides within our community this past year. One is too many, we cannot allow one more life to be lost.

This is why I'm committed to ensuring our entire dental community knows about the support available through the ADA's Dentist Health and Wellness Program and state dentist well-being programs.

In addition, we have our Wellness Ambassadors who connect members around the country to these critical resources.

A valuable tool that the ADA has been using for the past year is the Mayo Clinic's Well-Being Index, which is available for free to our members helps us assess our own well-being and access tailored support.

We are working on eliminating barriers that prevent our peers from seeking help. Intrusive mental health questions on state licensure and credentialing applications discourage dentists from accessing support.

Studies show those who use the state-supported programs have a 75 percent recovery success rate, compared to just three to six percent for those who attempt recovery alone.

We must reduce the stigma around mental illness so our colleagues will access these programs without the fear of punitive measures.

I've been involved in the ADA's efforts to push for policy changes with the American Association of Dental Boards, and we've created a toolkit to help dental boards and organizations build more supportive environments — available at [ADA.org slash licensure reform](https://ada.org/licensure-reform).

Over the years, I've learned that wellness is multifaceted—it's about balancing physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social health. Each is interconnected.

Whether through physical work outs, eating right, staying mentally active, or having good relationships, it all affects how we feel and how we function every single day.

Dentistry is hard. It takes a toll on our bodies and on our minds. We must remember that we are our most valuable asset, and we must take care of ourselves as such.

I try to live by this daily, especially now in my leadership role. But this approach isn't just for me — it's for all of us.

When we are at our best, we can give our best to those we serve. But giving our best doesn't stop there...

Our strength as a profession comes from our diversity.

Diversity and Inclusivity are two of our core values—it's time we fully embrace both.

I'm reminded of my great-uncle Dave.

He was one of the first Jewish students at Northwestern School of Law.

He experienced all sorts of acts of bigotry during his time there.

It's painful to think that those challenges still exist today, but they serve as a reminder that our work is far from over.

My great uncle's experiences, and others like them, have taught me that effective leadership is about showing up, listening, and creating a culture of belonging where EVERY person feels valued and included.

Not all of our colleagues feel welcome at the ADA. That needs to change.

As a former chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, I've seen and heard about discrimination within our profession that is simply unacceptable.

I recall an incident from a dental school presentation on airway issues attended by a third-year dental school class that included several Black students...

When the instructor asked, "How do you measure the circumference of a neck in the dental chair?"

The very next slide showed an image of a hooded man hanging from a noose. This happened recently at one of our finest institutions.

When I receive letters suggesting we're focusing too much on DEI issues, I think of these students, and I pledge to make sure that nothing like this atrocious act EVER happens again.

The ADA will continue to build a culture where diversity, inclusion, and respect aren't just things we talk about, but actions we take every single day—because if we want to truly serve everyone, we have to live these values in everything we do.

Our mission is deeply rooted in ensuring that every dentist succeeds... no matter their gender, age, ethnicity, career stage, sexual orientation, or how they choose to practice.

This commitment extends to every career path — from private practice and large-group settings, DSO's to education, public health, and beyond —wherever quality care is delivered.

Quality care exists across all practice modalities.

Generalizations that suggest otherwise alienate our colleagues who work in diverse environments and make them feel excluded for their personal career choices.

We need to stop it.

Representation matters because it strengthens our profession, improves access to care, and better reflects the diverse communities we serve.

And if we're serious about tackling health disparities... we have to support ALL dentists and ALL pathways that lead to greater access—

especially as more dentists are choosing to practice in large dental groups with different types of ownership models.

To truly achieve this, we must provide support so that every dentist can bring their full and best selves to the work they love and the patients they serve.

As we help our colleagues thrive, it's equally our responsibility to ensure our patients live their best lives, too.

Our role goes beyond just fixing teeth — I was so excited a few years ago when the board of Trustees unanimously articulated our “Why” ... we make people healthy.

When we rally around our “why,” we achieve both aspects of our mission: we elevate our profession, and we advance the health of the public.

During my General Practice Residency at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, I saw firsthand how medicine and dentistry under one roof complement each other and improve patient outcomes.

This reinforced the fact that the mouth is truly connected to the body.

For too long, oral health has been treated as separate from overall health. But we all know that oral health is health, and it's up to us to elevate it as such and redefine dentistry's role in primary care.

Consider this: Why has it become culturally accepted that a patient with degenerative joint disease in the hip can get a titanium replacement through their medical benefits, but they can't a dental implant to replace a missing tooth?

If I am young, old
Rich, poor
Male, female
Black, white
In shape, out of shape
I can get a titanium post in my hip but not in my mouth.

Why do we accept this? Why is walking considered more important than chewing? Both are essential for quality of life.

If we applied the same dental benefit model to medicine, patients needing hip replacements would get crutches instead—because that's what a flipper is... a crutch.

We should have the same opportunity to provide the finest dentistry has to offer just like medicine has been afforded. Why is walking more or less important than chewing or replacing a front tooth?

Think about that....

What if we truly had an essential benefit that makes the oral cavity healthy, the occlusion functional and a smile that is acceptable?

And imagine if we got paid an appropriate fee for the services that we provide!

L.D. Pankey once famously said, 'I never saw a tooth walk into my office.' It was always attached to a person. Get to know that person, you may get the opportunity to treat them as patients.

As dentists, we build lasting relationships with our patients—some of mine have been with me for over 25 years.

Few physicians today can say that.

This dedication drives us to seek better ways to serve them, because we're not just caregivers; we're trusted advisors and advocates for their health.

After many years running a fee-for-service practice, I joined the board of the Colorado Dental Association and discovered that two-thirds of my fellow Coloradans couldn't see a dentist because they lacked benefits or couldn't afford care.

That realization drove me to join our legislative advocacy team that engaged with lawmakers to help create an adult dental Medicaid program within my state, giving 300,000 people access to a dental home that they never had before.

Over the last 10 years the Colorado Dental Association, along with the state legislators, have built a plan that has truly become an essential health benefit for Coloradoans.

Recently, I spoke with a reporter at *USA Today* about another patient—a woman who passed away from a brain abscess whose origin was an untreated dental infection. She couldn't find a Medicaid provider—even though it was medically necessary.

The reporter asked me how I felt about this tragedy. Of course I expressed that I was sad. But this tragedy wasn't a failure of dentistry; it was a failure of the system.

For every patient like her, thousands of dentists are ready to help—and they do—but Medicaid's limitations often prevent us from delivering the care our patients need, and they deserve.

This harsh reality affects millions, including 80 million seniors who still lack predictable access to dental care.

When I served on the ADA's Council on Dental Benefits Plans, I initially opposed a Medicare benefit in dentistry. But seeing these numbers, I knew we had to find solutions.

Over the past year, the ADA has ramped up its dental insurance reform efforts and continues to seek ways to improve access—with the goal that NO patient is left behind. We will continue to help states this coming year through SPA and FIIST grants.

As we see the expansion occurring in Medicare's coverage of medically necessary dental care—and as we push for a comprehensive adult dental Medicaid benefit — we're also driving reforms in the private benefits sector.

You heard Dr. Edgar highlight several of these recent wins on Saturday, and I'm ready to carry that torch forward, as we continue advancing the ADA's vision of achieving optimal health for all.

To get there, we must rethink the outdated benefit models that no longer serve us. We need to champion a whole-health philosophy because dentistry isn't just about teeth—it's about the overall well-being of our patients.

In order to elevate dentistry's role in complete health, it requires a significant shift from sick care to proactive wellness care.

It begs the question... Who will lead this shift? Who else but the ADA?

To advance this mission, I'm excited to announce that we'll be hosting another symposium this June, ushering in a new era of holistic care—one that's long overdue.

Traditionally, dentistry has been tied to a surgically-based reimbursement model—one where we only get paid when we spin our drills. Yet, medicine is reimbursed for screenings, consultations, and managing chronic conditions. It's time for dentistry to move in that direction too.

In the next 20 years, the demand for operative dentistry will likely decrease. Preventive measures like water fluoridation have already led to fewer cavities. We know that fluoride is being challenged right now too.

And while caries management will still be a part of our work, future generations of our patients will face fewer dental issues.

Given these trends, the ADA must continue to lead the way in making oral health recognized as essential.

This means adopting new technologies, advancing research, expanding into broader health screenings—and being compensated for them.

What a concept!

A lot of this change is already underway.

Medical-dental collaborations are already prevalent in FQHCs.

Dentists are broadening their scope to include airway screening and treatment, tackling issues like obstructive sleep apnea, and offering solutions such as oral appliances and orthognathic surgery.

Technological advancements are continuing to reshape how we care for patients and connect with each other.

AI is emerging as a powerful diagnostic tool, and it's set to make a major impact on dentistry within the next five years.

Imagine the possibilities with AI: Imagine having the most amazing personal assistant at your fingertips—AI whispering into your earpiece about a patient's history and personal details, information that I once buried in my patients' charts.

AI will not replace the human touch of us as caregivers, but I see AI actually augmenting the doctor-patient relationship. Something we hold sacred.

Looking ahead, ADA Forsyth will be instrumental in driving research that positions dentistry at the forefront of healthcare innovation, ensuring that we continue to lead in transforming patient care.

It's through these efforts that we can make a difference in the lives of MILLIONS of people—because we are the ADA.

How cool is that? Let's take pride in that.

When we stand together, anything is possible. It is time to be creative. It is time to think different. It is time to think bigger!

I know that we can and we will change the world.

Thank you.