Getting to Know You

Why dentistry? I fell into dentistry by accident. I was a sophomore in college majoring in biology working in a biochemistry lab. I randomly landed a job working for an oral surgeon. I loved it. I always thought dentistry seemed dull. However, it proved to be the perfect combination of my passion for people and the sciences.

Dr. Monica Urda, a general dentist in Chicago, poses with her dog, Brad, at Starved Rock State Park.

Dr. Monica Urda

Large group practice associate

When Dr. Sneha Patel started looking for a job after graduating in 2015 from the University of Oklahoma School of Dentistry, she knew she wanted to be close to her Yukon, Oklahoma, home. So when she was offered a position with a dental service organization, Heartland Dental, in Yukon, it was an easy choice to say yes.

Beyond the convenience of the location, her decision to join the dental service organization has been a good fit for her, she said.

“I appreciate Heartland’s model of being doctor-led,” Dr. Patel said.

“I like that I lead my office, but still have the support I need as a new dentist in the areas I feel weakest in. I have easy access to a large network of more experienced dentists who are always willing to advise and mentor me both with clinical questions and leadership challenges.”

Dr. Patel said she and another dentist lead her office team. She works four days a week and sees around 15-20 patients each day, completing a wide range of procedures, including root canals, restorations and dentures, she said.

“I have control in how I want my schedule to look, and I work with my team to implement my scheduling guidelines so that I can decrease the stress and maximize my time with my patients,” Dr. Patel said.

Why are you an ADA member? The ADA is a fundamental component of our profession. With the internet, patients have access to so much information — some correct, some incorrect. The ADA is the only voice that can cut through the noise. It’s a trusted source for most patients and providers, and it helps keep our profession a trusted one.

What was your first job? I was a deck and slide attendant at the local pool. It was extraordinarily boring. There was a toddler slide that was isolated on three sides by a tall fake rock wall. Unfortunately, once I got de-skated to the usually quiet and serene toddler slide, I would doze off. I would often awake to a small, wet, cold hand shaking my arm to see if they could go down the slide.

What has been the best time of your career so far? Right now. My office has been open for a little over a year. I am honestly in disbelief how fast it has grown and continues to grow. We work Monday-Saturday, and one Sunday a month. It may seem like a lot of hours, but it’s amazing to be able to work in and on your dream every day. I no longer take naps on the job.

When I’m not practicing, I’m:

Out and about exploring the city that I love! My little five-pound dog, Brad, loves to walk miles and miles all over the city. There is so much to do in Chicago that I tend to do something different almost every week.

One fun fact about me: I am proficient in both the Dab and the Nae Nae.

Dr. Hadi Ghazzouli

Private practice owner

As a boy, Dr. Hadi Ghazzouli remembers raising family members’ eyebrows with his peculiar interest in washing his grandfather’s denture. “I found it fascinating,” he said, adding with a laugh that his parents “weren’t sure if they should be happy” about their tot’s unusual hobby. But the curiosity about dentistry never wore off, and these days Dr. Ghazzouli oversees two dental practices in Pennsylvania.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine, Dr. Ghazzouli completed a general practice residency at a hospital that he said “reaffirmed” his interest in being a business owner in addition to a dentist.

“It gave me the opportunity to talk with different dentists around the area and gauge what I wanted to do,” he said of the residency.

Around that time, one of his dental instructors whom he had kept in touch with called. He needed help in one of his dental offices and wanted Dr. Ghazzouli to step in. After two years working at his former instructor’s dental office, Dr. Ghazzouli became a partner. A few years later, he bought a second office closer to the home he shares with Dr. Candice Ghazzouli, his wife who is also a dentist. “We felt like we saw an opportunity in a growing area, and we decided that we were ready to expand,” he said.

While both managing administrative tasks and seeing patients can be demanding, Dr. Ghazzouli said managing his own practices allows him to treat patients with his own patient-centered care philosophy. “The best thing is you’re your own boss,” he said.

For new dentists interested in...
Specialty pathway: Oral pathology

Q&A with Dr. Emily Lanzel

Dr. Emily Lanzel likes solving puzzles. It's a simple enough hobby and a simple enough reason why she pursued oral pathology. "Each case is a new puzzle," said Dr. Lanzel, a visiting assistant professor at the University of Iowa College of Dentistry.

Dr. Lanzel holds a master's degree and a certificate in oral and maxillofacial pathology from the University of Iowa, where she also received her dental degree. In addition, she has a bachelor's degree in Spanish from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In the ADA New Dentist News asked Dr. Lanzel about the details that went into her decision to pursue a specialty. Here is a summary of the conversation:

Q. How and when did you choose to pursue oral pathology?
A. Dentistry is a wonderful profession, but from day one, I was not cut out for general dentistry. I loved the basic science courses, had a passion for studying and a dislike of using my hands. I would much rather take a test than cut a crown prep. I fell in love with oral pathology my second year of dental school during our oral pathology course.

Luckily, the course was taught by one of the greatest educators and nicest people I have ever met, Dr. Mike Finkelson, and he fostered my interest. There was no going back from there. When it came time to apply for residency, I weighed the positive and negatives — professionally and personally — and decided to follow my passion for pathology and academicians. Looking back, it was one of the best decisions I have made, and I have no regrets.

Q. How would you describe some of the benefits or challenges of pursuing a specialty?
A. By far, the benefit of pursuing something I was truly passionate about far outweighed the challenges. But, the job market for oral pathology is a definite challenge. The jobs are not plentiful and, unlike general dentistry, you can’t go easy anywhere to practice.

Q. What factors did you consider and what resources did you use to help you make this decision?
A. The best resource was talking to current residents and practicing pathologists to get information about residency cost, job outlook, day-to-day life during residency, etc. I probably should have done more investigating of the pros/cons than I did, but nothing was going to keep me away from studying oral pathology at that point. I also spent three weeks between my third and fourth year of dental school in the oral pathology department experiencing what the residency was like.

Q. What else should dentists know when considering pursuing a specialty?
A. If there is a specialty you are interested in, see if you can do an externship or job shadow within the department to get a better feel of what you would be getting into. Also, choose a specialty/job that you can see yourself doing every day and still love it.

Federal options for paying off debt

Looking for ideas on how to pay off your student loans faster? Here are some federal programs available to new dentists.

The National Health Service Corps offers loan repayments and scholarships for dentists who practice in Health Professional Shortage Areas. For information about the National Health Services Corp., visit the NHSC’s main webpage and search “loans and scholarships.” To locate a federally qualified health center opportunity, visit the National Health Services Corps website nhsc.hrsa.gov and choose the jobs center link.

In 2017, NHSC expanded its Students to Service Scholarship Program to provide up to 75 financial awards to dentists in their final year of school. The Students to Service Program pays for tuition and fees of future primary care providers, including dentists, interested in serving communities in need. The program is open to students who are in their final year of medical or dental school pursuing primary care careers and provides up to $120,000 in scholarships.

For more information on applying for the 2018 program, visit nhsc.hrsa.gov. The U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps are uniformed dental officers, serving in more than 20 agencies. The Commissioned Corps is part of the Department of Health and Human Services and overseen by the U.S. Surgeon General. While the Commissioned Corps is not an armed service, officers may have the opportunity to assist in public health responses to man-made and natural disasters and officers receive the same benefits as their counterparts in the military. For more information, visit usphs.gov/profession/dentist/.

The Armed Forces Health Professions Scholarship Program has one-, two-, three- and four-year scholarships that cover most educational costs and provide a stipend. For more information, contact a health professions recruiter to discuss opportunities with the Army, Air Force and Navy. You can also learn more at Success.ADA.org and searching “jobs in federal dentistry.” For ADA resources on debt visit ada.org/mydebt.
Talking finances in a clinical setting

One of the greatest challenges for many dentists is the need to discuss money with patients.

Dentists are people who are devoted to the well-being of their patients; just read any dental school admissions essay and you will clearly see that we are a population of helpers. So in the dental operatory, after having presented treatment to the best of your ability, you may dread the eventual question, “How much will this cost?” Your intuitive reaction may be to flee, to allow others to field this question or to respond with defense: “You need this treatment! How much it costs is irrelevant!” But, as Vince Lombardi once said, “Preparedness is the ultimate confidence builder.”

The best way to handle the difficulty of discussion money is to go into any patient encounter prepared. The following outlines three steps you can take to effectively prepare for this discussion.

Hire the right person

The best person to discuss the intricacies of the cost of treatment is not the dentist. Our role in the practice should be clearly clinical. When hiring the front staff or office manager, ask questions regarding sales experience. This will help you find the right fit for these responsibilities. It may be difficult to see dentistry as a business involving sales, but we must remember sales and ethics are not mutually exclusive.

Dentistry does involve sales in the complexities of treatment acceptance. When you hire the right people, people who have a comprehensive knowledge of sales psychology and insurance procedures alike, they will be able to have an objective and educational conversation with the patient and close on the treatment you have prescribed.

Understand insurance

Insurance is very common in our day and age. And depending on the type of insurance, the cost to the patient can vary significantly. As a new dentist, this is one of the most challenging things to maneuver. If your practice accepts a wide range of insurance, it is necessary to get acclimated to not only understanding how certain insurance plans work but also what verbiage to use when explaining insurance matters to patients. This will primarily fall on the treatment coordinator to articulate, but in times the dentist needs to discuss these matters, it is best when it has been ironed out and the dentist has a good working knowledge of matters.

Know your role

Although you must have the right people on your team, this does not give the dentist a free pass. Dentists must understand that their treatment has a financial (and emotional) value attached to it. Dentists must be comfortable enough discussing finances to cohesively pass the baton to their team. The patient will typically ask these questions at the end of a diagnostic appointment. The dentist’s role is to translate the value. My general rules of thumb for my involvement with finances is as follows:

Do not get in the way
The worst thing a dentist can do is misquote treatment fees (either too high or too low). When I do not know the specific cost, I hold my tongue and let the patient know we must collect more information to give a more precise estimate.

Do set the stage
Whenever possible, I do let the patient know much they can expect to pay but also let them know that my staff are excellent at figuring out the tricky details with insurance. I make sure they have no additional clinical questions and understand the value of the treatment. I am recommending before helping them transition to a meeting with a treatment coordinator.

Do ask questions
It is really easy to make assumptions when hearing questions about cost. It is almost intuitive to assume they most likely cannot afford treatment.

It is really easy to make assumptions when hearing questions about cost. It is almost intuitive to assume they most likely cannot afford treatment.

Continued from front page

Dr. Sneha Patel

“overwhelming.”
“My advice is to just pick something,” she said. “Start somewhere. You never know what experiences you might have or what you might learn.

If it’s a bad experience, then fine. Check it off your list and move on to the next opportunity.”

Dr. Sam Willens

In addition to treating patients, Dr. Willens in his current role supervises general practice residents, a part of his job that appeases his interest in dental education, he said.

But perhaps the best part of the job, he said, is the opportunity to meet so many veterans, learn their stories and thank them for their service. “I feel so much respect for what they’ve done and being able to help improve their oral health is my small way of giving back,” Dr. Willens said.

Dr. Amisha Singh

It is really easy to make assumptions when hearing questions about cost. It is almost intuitive to assume they most likely cannot afford treatment.

This article, written by Dr. Amisha Singh, originally appeared May 22, 2017, in the ADA New Dentist Now blog (newdentist.ada.org).
New Dentist Conference offers opportunity to network, share experiences

When North Carolina dentist Dr. Kristin Kaelke Miller says that one of the highlights of the New Dentist Conference is the networking, she means it. “Well, at the meeting last year in Denver, I met someone at my 16th District lunch table that led me to get my awesome new job out of it,” Dr. Miller said. “An associate was there from a practice that was two minutes from where I live. The practice was somewhat new, but I don’t know if I would have found out about them as quickly if we hadn’t sat down and started talking that day. They were looking for someone with my background and experience, and the timing was perfect. Networking doesn’t get much better than that for me.”

Dr. Miller, a member of the class of 2011 of the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Dentistry, has been going to the New Dentist Conference since 2014, with plans to attend this year’s event in Atlanta in October, concurrent with ADA 2017 – America’s Dental Meeting.

The New Dentist Committee chair at the North Carolina Dental Society, Dr. Miller said there are many reasons why she makes it a point to be a part of each year’s New Dentist Conference. “I love going to see old friends and faces and network with other like-minded dentists, new and old,” she said. “I catch up with old classmates from my dental school in Kansas City, but I get to see a lot of new dentist friends that live all across North Carolina, too. Even though we’re in the same state and all fairly involved in organized dentistry, I don’t regularly see them, so it’s fun to be able to hang out and relax together. I get a lot of opportunity to do continuing education near me, so the continuing education, social events and food are a bonus.”

Louisiana-based Dr. Raymond Jarvis, who graduated from the Louisiana State University School of Dentistry in 2010, is one of two national New Dentist Committee members that work with the ADA to organize and plan the New Dentist Conference. Dr. Jarvis first attended the conference last year, and said he is a strong advocate for new dentists to come to Atlanta.

“One tough part about being a dentist is that we work in our practices by ourselves or with a small group of other dentists day in and day out,” Dr. Jarvis said. “The New Dentist Conference gives us a chance to interact with other new dentists from around the country to share and learn about our successes and failures. It can be very freeing to learn that we all share similar experiences of learning to manage the daily goings on of a dental practice, supporting our student debt, juggling work and family life, et cetera. On top of that, we have an amazing lineup of inspirational speakers and CE courses as part of the New Dentist Conference.”

He added, “We really have put in a lot of work in to make this an amazing conference. I am looking forward to seeing many new dentists at the conference. I hope that everyone takes full advantage of everything the New Dentist Conference and the ADA Meeting has to offer.”

The New Dentist Conference is October 19–21 at the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta, concurrent with ADA 2017 – America’s Dental Meeting. Register at ADA.org/NDC.