Needed: A Culture Shift of Support and Recognition
A Look at the Data of the Dental Workforce Shortages

BY KATE RYAN

November 22, 2022 – Like many professions, the dental sector has faced significant staffing shortages in the last few years. The Health Policy Institute (HPI) collaborated with the American Dental Hygienists’ Association (ADHA®), the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB), the American Dental Assistants Association (ADAA) and igniteDA, to conduct new research to better understand the satisfaction, retention and turnover of dental hygienists. On Oct. 3, a webinar was held to communicate this study and to explore questions surrounding the findings.

The report, Dental Workforce Shortages: Data to Navigate Today’s Labor Market, used data collected from thousands of dental assistants, dental hygienists and dentists in 2022. The report found that workforce shortages are not a direct side effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. The issues causing the shortage have gradually escalated for years and are likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

Chelsea Fosse, HPI senior health policy analyst, presented the findings of the research. Panelists JoAnn Gurenlian, director of education and research for ADHA; Hana Alberti, senior director for the ADA Center for Dental Practice Policy; and Hanna Aronovich, DANB chief marketing and communications officer then discussed their perspectives. Dr. Marko Vujicic, HPI chief economist and vice president, served as moderator.

“We can’t blame everything on the pandemic. This report really showed that there are other issues that we need to address,” said JoAnn Gurenlian on the panel for the webinar, “We need to look at these findings as a long-term issue because it’s been a long-term problem. There needs to be recognition by employers that there is a problem.”

The research outlines that approximately 33.7% of dental assistants and 31.4% of dental hygienists plan to retire from the workforce in five years or less. The majority of dental
assistants and dental hygienists indicated that they receive benefits like raises, dental insurance, paid holidays, paid vacation, and retirement savings from their employers. However, some professionals are still considering leaving the profession due to negative workplace culture, insufficient pay, lack of growth opportunities, inadequate benefits and feeling overworked.

“You must provide a workplace culture that is supportive of employees. Praise them. Say thank you. Show them you see them and value them for the contributions they are making to your practice.” said Gurenlian, “The study pointed to the fact that many dental hygienists are very happy in their work, but others are dissatisfied in their roles. We didn’t realize hygienists needed help addressing their workplace issues, and their employers needed assistance in dealing with these issues as well.”

While the webinar brought up many points of what this research could mean for the workplace future of dental assistants and dental hygienists, all panelists agreed that the entire dental sector must come together in order to best tackle this issue.

“Staying in a mode of communication while being open and supportive of each other will really make a huge difference,” expressed Gurenlian. “If that can move from our major national organizations down to the levels of every practice setting, we will make huge progress.”

Watch the webinar  
View the research report

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