

Executive Director Remarks to the 2020 Kentucky Dental Association House of Delegates

You may know that the Chinese word for “crisis” is composed of two characters. One represents danger. The other represents opportunity. This notion has been expressed by both political leaders and pop culture icons who suggest the virtue of making metaphorical lemons into metaphysical lemonade. In the last year, we have certainly had occasion to apply that philosophy in practice working to find our opportunities and avoid danger to this organization brought on by COVID-19 and other challenges.

We continue to develop better relationships with both stakeholders and policymakers. We have worked often day and night on behalf of members on issues ranging from Medicaid and a proposed provider tax to water fluoridation and opioid abuse. Most importantly, we have worked to ensure our dentists are looked to as the experts by policymakers when decisions are made that impact oral health.

There are so many of these members I wish I could recognize here. They have been on countless calls, emails, texts and Zoom meetings together. There are too many to list here and that is a good problem to have. We have worked to develop this level of communication and involvement for many years. We can never be complacent. But, we should recognize how far we have come and acknowledge the work of so many this past year on behalf of our members. I must particularly recognize the members of our executive committee (Dr. Moats, Dr. Greenwell, Dr. Howard, Dr. Rich, Dr. Turner, Dr. Bobrowski and Dr. Lee) as well as Libby Milligan of McCarthy Strategic Solutions for their tireless work over days, nights, weekends and holidays this past year.

I would like to thank all our KDA officers and members for their support and hard work on behalf of organized dentistry year in and year out. I particularly thank Dr. Moats for his service and his work to lead through one of the most challenging times for anyone involved with healthcare in recent memory. It has been great to work with him this past year and to see firsthand his passion for dentistry and his work to address the challenges facing working dentists across the Commonwealth. One thing I hope never changes is our leader’s commitment to the profession that he embodied throughout this year. We look forward to working with Dr. Moats on the annual session and as immediate past-president on the executive committee.

I must also acknowledge the members of our KDA team who worked so hard this year. Todd Edwards, Janet Glover, Melissa Nathanson and Jenna Scott. Their extraordinary commitment to organized dentistry – particularly in the last six months – has been incredible. They are truly committed to serving our KDA members and improving this organization.

Membership is not where we would like and certainly not where we need to be. The pandemic hit us hard financially and this is partially illustrated by our decreased member renewal rate. Despite proving our member value during this crisis through providing critical information and support to members, we felt unable to ask those dentists to renew when they were either closed or struggling to reopen. As a result, our market share for the end of the second quarter of 2020 was 44.8%. That is a drop of 4.3% over this time last year. That said, the actual number of members renewing was only 40 dentists less than this time last year. Much of the apparent dip in market share was a function of an increase in the total market by 136 dentists over last year at this time. However, the most troubling issue with membership

remains the downward trend of member dentists paying full dues. We continue to address this through fiscal austerity and developing new sources of non-dues revenue.

A recent member value survey conducted by the ADA showed that our members feel we do a good job in delivering services and programs important to them. Not surprisingly, that survey shows the most important of these is advocacy. In recognition of that response and the concerns expressed by our members, we are laying the groundwork to pursue an insurance reform agenda in the coming legislative session.

Late last year, the ADA developed a Dental Care Bill of Rights based upon proposed model language from the National Council of Insurance Legislators (NCOIL). This bill of rights reframes problems formerly referred to as third-party payer issues through the lens of access to care which is hindered by uncertainty. It promotes fair dealing between insurers and providers addressing practices which often serve as a disincentive to provider participation. In so doing, it also provides greater clarity to patients and dentists regarding what will and will not be covered. There has also been much interest expressed in including revisions to the current statute governing non-covered services.

The insurance lobby has already expressed concern over a possible bill based upon the NCOIL language. The primary criticism is that proposed changes have been mischaracterized as serving patients and that they truly only serve providers. Their criticism fails to consider the fact that providers cannot continue to serve their patients if they cannot afford to keep their doors open. A healthcare delivery scheme that fundamentally lacks principles of certainty or simple fairness for providers cannot be expected to serve as the foundation for building greater access to care and ensuring better oral health outcomes. Policy makers and elected officials need to hear the story of working dentists in Kentucky. We will continue to be that voice for our members.

We have been working closely with our lobbying firm to learn just what it would take for our David to take on the insurance lobby's Goliath. We have been told that to have a chance of accomplishing this ambitious agenda, we will need to devote more financial resources to lobbying activity. Your dues support the work of this association in providing advocacy and other services that help members succeed in practice and serve their patients. Organized dentistry depends upon these dues as well as non-dues revenue to ensure we have a seat at the table on decisions about and impacting oral health in the Commonwealth. The support of our members is critical to our success as an organization on matters involving public policy. So, beginning in 2021, your dues statement will include an annual opt-out advocacy fee of \$150 to support the advocacy work of KDA in lobbying efforts and representation in Frankfort. We are hopeful that our members will support our efforts to continue and potentially increase our influence and footprint in the realm of public policy.

We have also received a small grant from the ADA to help us prepare to launch this initiative. This financial support from the ADA and our membership are simply steps necessary to have any chance of achieving this goal. But, that alone is not sufficient. Our members must be engaged as never before in order to improve our chances of success in mounting a serious campaign against a well-funded and well-organized opposition. This effort will require members to be points of contact willing to reach out to their legislators and express support for this initiative. It will require members to contribute to our political action committee. Finally, it will require our local societies to help coordinate activity and maintain communication through its officers and representatives with KDA.

This looks like a daunting challenge. Others have done it. But, only when they were able to truly engage the members of their profession. These members not only supported the efforts of their association, they got involved. We can follow their example and achieve this kind of change if we are willing to do the work. I often refer to the fable that illustrates the concept of strength in unity. It tells us that sticks are easily broken one-by-one. But, bundled together, they become much more difficult to break. So, there is strength in unity and that is a force multiplier in advocacy. It is the difference between running and winning a race.

We look forward to working with Dr. Greenwell in the coming year as we continue to build on the foundation of our strategic plan and begin the work necessary to pursue this aggressive legislative agenda in 2021. It is essential that we maintain dentists as the leaders in these discussions, setting the agenda, and finding solutions. We can't expect others to reshape this profession in a way that will best serve dentists and the patients they serve.

Winston Churchill said that a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty. We don't have to look too far to find things that are difficult to do if we are to grow this organization and influence the decisions of elected officials and policymakers on oral health. But, let's recognize that even in these most challenging of times we can find great opportunity if we choose to work together and step up as leaders on issues impacting oral health in the Commonwealth. I look forward to continuing that journey with all of you.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your executive director.

Respectfully, Submitted,

Richard A. Whitehouse