

LETTERS

EQUIPPING THE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT WORKFORCE TO END ORAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

The recent article by Haber et al.¹ rightfully emphasizes the public health crisis reinforced when providers overlook the oral–systemic connection; and the innovative HEENOT approach to physical examination is a potential boon for putting the mouth back in the body while fostering the development of interprofessional competencies among providers who will have a shared way of conducting a physical examination that appropriately includes the mouth. Like our nursing colleagues, the physician assistant (PA) profession has embraced oral health as the low hanging fruit of prevention, aiming to ensure that PAs are equipped with appropriate oral health competencies.

In 2008, seminal work by Jacques et al. found that only 32.8% of responding PA programs (n = 83) provided oral health instruction.² Shortly thereafter in 2010, the four major national PA organizations, representing the profession's regulatory, educational, and membership entities, came together to leverage a collective impact strategy.^{3,4} They would use this strategy to achieve the shared goal of equipping the PA workforce of more than

100 000 certified PAs⁵ to make the oral–systemic connection and contribute to the improvement of oral health in our country. With support from the National Interprofessional Initiative on Oral Health (NIOH) and funding from the DentaQuest Foundation, Washington Dental Service Foundation, and the Connecticut Health Foundation, the PA Leadership Initiative in Oral Health fosters the organizations' ability to work together in mutually supportive ways on activities that each organization is uniquely equipped to conduct in support of shared goals. Annual summits allow for environmental scanning, sharing of outcomes, evaluation of lessons learned, and the opportunity to vision together about future activities to advance the profession's capacity to be part of the solution for reducing oral health disparities.

Four short years later, the PA profession has expanded its reach, partnering with stakeholders across medicine, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, HRSA, the workforce community, and others as a way for PAs to advance this important public health issue. A 2014 national survey of PA program directors measured oral health penetration in their curriculum, and the results indicated a significant uptake of oral health topics; 78.4% of responding programs (n = 125) had integrated oral health content,⁶ a notable increase over the 2008 study. These efforts reflect our belief that public health is best served through the collective impact of health professions that innovatively equip practitioners with the appropriate competencies and skills to achieve shared goals of improving health. ■

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This letter was accepted February 9, 2015.
doi:10.2105/AJPH.2015.302632

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