

# WE'VE COME A LONG WAY, DOCTOR

Lisa Richter

**W**omen and dentistry go way back. In his copper engraving dated 1523—one of the earliest depictions of the emerging profession—Dutch artist Lucas van Leyden included a woman in his portrayal of the new craft known as dentistry. The female subject is the dentist’s assistant, and she is helping herself to the patient’s wallet while his tooth is extracted by the good doctor.

Fast forward to 2004, when 15% of the nation’s 166,000 dentists are women, and the predoctoral enrollment in dental schools is 40% female and growing.

Clearly, we’ve come a long way.

It took a handful of trailblazing women to move women from stealer to healer. Their early struggles and triumphs are fairly well-known: Lucy Beaman Hobbs Taylor, the first woman granted the degree of doctor of dental surgery in 1869; Henrietta Hirschfield, the first woman to complete a full dental school curriculum and graduate; Emeline Roberts Jones, the first U.S. woman credited with establishing her own regular practice circa 1870. (See timeline.)

By the early 1900s, the number of females in dentistry remained relatively small (it peaked at 3% in 1920, and then hovered between 1% and 2% for decades, see chart on page 15), reflecting the current culture and expectations. It wasn’t until the mid-1970s, as women joined the work force in a growing number of fields, that the number of female dentists slowly began to swell. These women—your average Janes—represent another wave of pioneers: Women who continued to blaze trails but also made serious inroads into the profession. And it wasn’t—and isn’t—always easy. For, although nearly every female dentist credits a strong male role model or mentor as the

reason she decided to pursue dentistry, she was, and still is, likely to encounter a roadblock or two.

### YOU’LL NEVER MAKE IT

By the time she had enrolled in dental school in 1980, CDS Northwest Side Branch Director Barbara Mousel had already worked for 11 years as a dental assistant and a dental hygienist. For her, the roadblock was a school administrator who tried to discourage her.

“I had been in the work force for many years before I decided to pursue dentistry,” recalled Dr. Mousel. “In fact, I was working full time at a dental office and in full-time hygiene school when it occurred to me that it

wouldn’t be that much more work to go for my dental degree. So I visited the program chair at the dental school to find out what it would take to round out my program. He told me flat out, ‘It’s impossible. . . You’ll never be able to make the transition from employee to employer.’” Far from discouraging Dr. Mousel, this advice only made her mad enough to prove him wrong. She went on to earn her degree and, eventually, start her own practice, which she still runs today on Chicago’s Northwest Side.

Sadly, said Dr. Mousel, this sort of “advice” from career counselors and even parents wasn’t uncommon in the

early 1980s. It was often underscored with subtle but constant reminders, such as the school’s welcome letter that reminded students to wear a tie for the class picture or the vaguely unfriendly atmosphere that permeated the classroom.

Dr. Mousel considers herself fortunate that, because she went to dental school later in life, she possessed the maturity and self-confidence to continue on her path despite the discrimination. Not all of her female classmates did.

**“FILLING A TOOTH REQUIRES LESS EFFORT OF MIND AND BODY THAN GETTING UP A DINNER; AND THE WHOLE OF DENTAL PRACTICE IS MERE PLAY WHEN COMPARED WITH HOUSEKEEPING.”**

—Editor of the *Dental Register* in 1865 in response to an editorial in the *Dental Times* that opined “The very form and structure of woman unfit her for its duties.”

## TIMELINE

**AD 300:** Apollonia is canonized for refusing to renounce her faith after having her teeth extracted one by one; since then, she has been the saint whose intercession has been sought for the relief of dental pain.

**1523:** Earliest known dental engraving depicts a dentist extracting a tooth, while his female assistant picks the patient’s pocket.



**1866:** Lucy Beaman Hobbs Taylor becomes the first woman granted a degree from a recognized dental college.

**1870:** U.S. Census lists 24 female practicing dentists.

**1876:** Emeline Roberts Jones establishes one of the largest and most lucrative practices in Connecticut.

Jennie D Spurrier opens her office, becoming the first female dentist in Illinois.

## CULTURE SHOCK

Once out of school, women of Dr. Mousel's generation found that old-fashioned attitudes followed them into the work force.

Solo practitioner Trucia Drummond, DDS, who graduated from dental school in 1981, cites organized dentistry as an example.

"In some ways, it's still a man's world," said Dr. Drummond, who served as the first female president of the Illinois State Dental Society in 2000-01. "Especially at the organizational level, it's heavily male." But, she is quick to point out that organized dentistry still offers countless opportunities for all practitioners. "Everyone should become involved at different levels when the time is right," she told the CDS *Review* in the July/August 2000 issue. "I joined organized dentistry 18 years ago, not with the intention of making history, but because it was the natural thing to do after completing dental school."

For younger generations—women who were schooled in gender-balanced classrooms—the transition to the "real" world, where their professional ranks may include only a handful of females, can create a bit of a culture shock.

"Organized dentistry still feels like a boy's club sometimes," said North Side Branch Correspondent Cissy Furusho, a 33-year-old pediatric dentist who co-owns a pediatric dental practice with two male colleagues. "But I always encourage the young women I meet to persevere and not be intimidated, because the rewards are worth it." Dr. Furusho, who serves as co-chair for the student chapter and president-elect of the national chapter of the American Association of Women Dentists, said it is also critical for women to support and encourage each other. "It falls on all of us to help open doors for the women who follow us, as well as the men."

Misperceptions are found outside of the profession as well. Nearly every female dentist—regardless of age—has had the experience of being asked by a vendor or tradesperson to "please get the doctor." Within a practice,

newer dentists may struggle to negotiate working relationships with staff members. It can be challenging to find the right balance between what's considered culturally appropriate for women and what it takes to run an office and command respect. Although not the norm, there are still male dentists who haven't quite let go of some more traditional ideas.

North Suburban Branch Correspondent Libby Graham, who has been a practicing orthodontist for four years, recalls that, during her job search in 1999, not one, but two dentists made a startling admission: They were reluctant to hire her because she was single, and, therefore, represented a risk.

"I was told by two doctors that, while they liked me and my background, they were very concerned about hiring me because I was single and, therefore, might get married and move away," said Dr. Graham. "The first time it happened I wrote it off as a fluke, but it happened again. By then I was deeply insulted as well as very angry."

Luckily, such incidents were the exception, not the rule, and Dr. Graham has since been happily employed as an associate in a supportive Northwest Side orthodontic group practice.

## "AT LEAST FOR CHILDREN [DENTAL HEALTH] IS A HUMAN RIGHT."

— Juliann S. Bluit, in a position paper titled "Putting Children First," as reported in the *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1972.

## PLAYING CATCH UP

In addition to banishing the remnants of traditional thinking, there are other areas where women are still playing catch up. Despite the soaring number of female dental students, the numbers of women faculty in dental schools has not increased proportionately. Women dental educators are poorly represented by rank and by percentage, as compared to other professions such as medicine, veterinary medicine and law, as reported by Susan Silverton in *Women and Dentistry: Patients Professors, Practitioner*. In 2001, there were only two emeritae professors who were women in the nation's 55 dental schools. Silverton also reported that only eight of the 55 schools had appointed women as deans or interim or act-



**1890:** Ida Gray Nelson Rollins becomes the first black woman to graduate from the University of Michigan dental school; she practices dentistry in Chicago.

**1892:** Mary Stillwell-Kuedsel founds the Women's Dental Association of the United States with 12 charter members.

**1898:** Eighty percent of dental colleges have co-ed programs.

M. Evangeline Jordan becomes the first U.S. pediatric dentist.

**1900:** The number of U.S. practicing women dentists is 807 in the United States.

**1906:** Dr. Leonie von Meusebach-Zasch becomes the first woman dentist to work for the U.S. Army (probably the first employed by the U.S. government) when she is hired to support U.S. Army emergency relief for victims of the San Francisco earthquake.

## LIVING HERSTORY: JULIANN BLUITT, DDS

When Juliann S. Bluitt enrolled in dental school more than four decades ago, she dreamed of a profession in which she could achieve independence as well as affect change.

The fact that she was female and African-American during a time when either was quite rare among the profession (and the combination practically unheard of) didn't give her pause.

"There was never any doubt that I had to do something educationally that would make the world better for succeeding generations," said Dr. Bluitt. "But I wasn't interested in the jobs that were traditionally available for women at the time, such as teaching or nursing." However, she realized that she had to accept some limitations.

"At that time (1950s), it was almost impossible for women, particularly African-American women, to become veterinarians, which is really what I wanted to do," said Dr. Bluitt. "So in my sophomore year, I switched to dentistry, which still allowed me to work with my hands and study science, which I quite liked, but I must admit it wasn't a vocation."

Despite the fact that dentistry wasn't her first choice, it is a decision that she hasn't regretted. "It's a great joy to be able to serve people, to help them out of pain and discomfort, to help them eliminate their fears," Dr. Bluitt told the *Chicago Tribune's* Carol Kleiman in a 1988 interview.

Dr. Bluitt, who among her myriad career accomplishments served as the first female president of the CDS, has spent much of her professional life doing just that. Early in her career, she practiced with the Chicago Board of Health as a dentist in the public schools and clinics around the city. She also volunteered her services to local Project Headstart Program.

From there, she joined the Northwestern University faculty in 1967 as director of dental hygiene, and, thus, became the first full-time African-American teacher at NU Dental School.

The move allowed her to train students to provide dental care for hundreds of people, said Dr. Bluitt, extending her reach exponentially. In addition, it afforded her a platform from which to launch or sponsor numerous community dental health programs, including a mobile dental clinic.

It also provided her with a varied career as she tackled different positions over the next 30 years at NU, including assistant and associate dean for auxiliary and community programs and patient relations, assistant professor of community medicine, associate dean of admissions to the dental school, and associate dean for student affairs.

Along the way, she devoted considerable time to organized dentistry,



raised two stepchildren and won many awards, including Dentist of the Year from the Illinois Chapter of the American Society of Dentistry for Children in 1973 and induction into the Chicago Women's Hall of Fame in December 1991.

"Sometimes I felt like a clown in the circus juggling plates," said Dr. Bluitt, of her numerous commitments. "But I have always felt it is important to have many interests, so that's what I did."

This untiring work ethic and dedication to causes has not abated since retiring four years ago. Dr. Bluitt, who, along with her husband of 31 years, Roscoe Foster, a retired orthodontist and former CDS director, splits her time between Chicago and Hilton Head Island, SC, and is still active on the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois board of directors and Hilton Head's Boys and Girls Club, among other activities.

For Dr. Bluitt, retirement is just an extension of her lifelong commitment to make the world a better place—something she set out to do more than 40 years ago. Yet, despite the years of blazing a trail for subsequent women and her many accomplishments, Dr. Bluitt is quite modest.

"I never envisioned myself as a pioneer, I just wanted to do the best I could," she said.

**1911:** Uterpe Thunis becomes the royal dentist for the Sultan of Turkey; as a gift, she receives the island of Scio.

**1914:** American Academy of Periodontology is founded by Gillette Hayden and Grace Rogers Spaulding.

**1920:** Three percent of all practicing dentists are women.

**1921:** Federation of American Women Dentists—later known as the American Association of Women Dentists—is established.

**1930:** U.S. census lists 1,287 female dentists; or 1.3% of practicing dentists.

ing deans. (Since then, several more deans have been appointed, including Ann Boyle at Southern Illinois University School of Dental Medicine.)

With the exception of pediatric dentistry and orthodontics, women are also underrepresented in the dental specialties. The article "Practice Differences Between Male and Female Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons: Survey Results and Analysis," published in the *Journal of Oral Maxillofacial Surgery*, noted that women represented 1.8% of practicing oral and maxillofacial surgeons in 1991, with a slight increase to 2.4% in 1996. This journal article noted another disparity: income. "Women earned 70 cents for every \$1 the men earned in the less than 10-year group. This rose to 72 cents for every dollar earned in the 10-years-or-more group."

An article in the November/December 1991 *AAWD Chronicle* confirms this gap. The author, Janice R. Work stated, "Statistically, women in dentistry are more prone to be single, childless, divorced and/or widowed than male dentists. The female pediatric dentist is no exception. . . . She also tends to make less money (\$76,000 to \$100,000 per year vs. the male average of \$100,000 to \$200,000 per year.)" She points out, however, that part of the gap is attributable to the fact that the average male in the study had seven more years of experience.

Over the past decade, women have closed the wage gap, but not completely. A more recent survey, the 1999 Survey of Career Patterns published by the ADA Survey Center in 2001, reported that the average mean net income of a full-time male dentist was \$158,830 compared to \$136,800 for females. (The median income was reported at \$149,280 for males, \$105,000 for females.)

## THE GOOD LIFE

Despite the fact that women are still underrepresented in the profession and lag behind in earning potential, most women feel that overall, dentistry is a rewarding, satisfying and fulfilling career. It's benefits—independence, earning potential, flexibility, helping people—far outweigh any negatives.

Researchers Linda Niessen, DDS, Dushanka Kleinman, DDS, and Ardell Wilson, DDS—authors of "Practice Characteristics of Women Dentists"—cited a study that found "women were significantly more satisfied than were men in respect to present positions and work settings."

There are also advantages inherent in being a female dentist, as Dr. Graham points out. "The perception of women as more gentle, nurturing and caring often means people will seek out a female dentist," said Dr. Graham.


Still another advantage comes from being one among many: instant recognition.

"Networking at a continuing education event is easier for me because, as one of only a few females, people tend to remember my name," said Dr. Graham. ♦

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**"THE MARCH MEETING OF THE CENTRAL DENTAL SOCIETY WAS A HISTORIC EVENT. THE DEAN OF UMDNJ DENTAL SCHOOL GAVE A PRESENTATION, THE NJDA PRESIDENT VISITED OUR SOCIETY AND THE MEETING WAS PRESIDED OVER BY OUR PRESIDENT. ALL OF THESE LEADERS WERE WOMEN."**

—Oliver A. Campbell, in his editorial "Evidence of the Changing Face of Dentistry," *Journal of the New Jersey Dental Association*, Summer 2003.



<b>1951:</b> Helen E. Myers is commissioned as the U.S. Army Dental Corps' first woman dental officer.	<b>1968:</b> The number of female dentists still hovers just over 1%.	<b>1975:</b> Marie U. Nylén becomes the first woman director of intramural research at the National Institute of Dental Research, National Institutes of Health.	<b>1975:</b> Jeanne C. Sinkford becomes the first woman dean of a dental school when she appointed dean at Howard University School of Dentistry.	<b>1983:</b> Three percent of dental practitioners are female (approximately 3,780).
				<b>1990:</b> Women represent 10% of practicing dentists.

**“TO THE CITIZENS OF LAWRENCE! THOSE WISHING ANYTHING DONE IN THE DENTAL LINE WILL FIND THE PARLOR COMFORTABLE AND THE OPERATING ROOM ALWAYS PURE, AND WELL PROVIDED WITH EVERY INSTRUMENT AND ARTICLE NECESSARY TO THE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE OF THE ART, TOGETHER WITH ALL USEFUL MODERN IMPROVEMENTS KNOWN TO THE PROFESSION.”**

—Lucy Beaman Hobbs Taylor in an advertisement that ran in the Jan. 7, 1868, edition of the *Kansas Daily Tribune*.

**CHRONOLOGY OF NUMBERS  
OF PRACTICING WOMEN DENTISTS**

Year	No. of practicing women dentists (%)
1870	24
1880	61
1890	337
1900	807
1920	1,829 (3.1)
1930	1,287
1940	1,000 (1.5)
1952	1,067 (1.5)
1958	1,254 (1.2)
1976	1,378 (1.2)
1979	1,934 (1.7)
1982	3,777 (3.0)
1991	13,863 (9.2)
2003	24,900 (15)

SOURCES: Loevy HT, Kowitz AA. Women Dentists, Hobbs and After. *J Hist Dent* 50(2002):123–130.

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**1991:** Geraldine T. Morrow becomes the first female president of the American Dental Association.

**1994:** Juliann Bluit becomes the first woman dentist elected president of the American College of Dentists.

**1997:** Hazel J. Harper becomes president of the National Dental Association.



**2000:** Trucia Drummond is installed as first female president of the Illinois State Dental Society.

**2001:** Dushanka V. Kleinman, a career U.S. Public Health Officer, is named chief dental officer of the uniformed service; she is the first woman to hold the post since it was established in 1923.

**2002:** Thirty-seven percent of U.S. dental graduates are women.

**2003:** Fifteen percent of the nation’s 166,000 dentists are women.