

The Dental Therapist Movement in the U.S.

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A Message from the JADE Editorial Board Chair

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This issue of the *Journal of the Academy of Distinguished Educators (JADE)* includes perspectives on controversies in educating the dental therapist (DT) and standardization of educational practices. The topic is timely and pertinent because more states are authorizing dental therapy practice, and new dental therapy education programs are opening and becoming accredited. It is also controversial, with disagreement over the capacity of this innovative workforce to address access to care issues and advance health equity. For example, dental therapy has been described in the literature as a disruptive innovation capable of either improving a failed or failing system on the one hand or leading to a substantial loss in profits and professional control and compromising the public's health and safety on the other.^{1,2}

There is disagreement about how we educate this new provider because of the potential to impact different stakeholders within the dental community and those they serve. The authors' perspectives illustrate how differences in education and standardization impact attitudes toward the profession, program costs and viability, uniformity of practice, license portability, interprofessional practice relationships, and, ultimately, the profession's effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.

Our contributors are recognized leaders in dental education and dental therapy who offer a range of expertise and experience on the topic. Andrew Spielman, DMD, MS, PhD, is a professor of molecular pathobiology at NYU Dentistry, former associate dean for academic affairs, and founding director of the College's Rare Books Library and Historical Archives. His article, "Dental Therapy: A Century of Controversy,"

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In Memory of Dr.
Andrew Schenkel

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The Dental Therapist: A
Century of Controversy

Dental Therapists Can
Help Improve Oral
Health Equity

Are Dental Therapists
the Answer to
Increasing Care for the
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the Results Fall Short

Dental Therapists: A
National Resource for
Improved Oral Health?

provides a historical account of dental therapy, its distribution worldwide, the type of curriculum that is followed for it globally and, in the U.S., the practice expectations of dental therapists and current controversies.

Frank Catalanotto, DMD, is a pediatric dentist and professor of community dentistry and behavioral science at the University of Florida. His article, “Dental Therapists Can Help Improve Oral Health Equity,” takes issue with dental institutions for not promoting dental therapy in their predoctoral curriculum and posits that they fail to meet their responsibility to the communities they advocate for and fall short in achieving equity and access to the profession.

The New York State Dental Association Executive Director, Greg Hill, JD, explains the status of NYS Senate Bill S819, Licensing of Dental Therapists and Advanced Dental Therapists, with insight regarding attitudes towards dental therapy in NY State. In “Are Dental Therapists the Answer to Increasing Care for the Underserved? So Far, the Results Fall Short,” Mr. Hill is critical of dental therapy’s track record in improving access to care and suggests alternative models.

Finally, Richard Valachovic, DMD, MPH, clinical professor and director of the NYU Dentistry Center for Oral Health Policy and Management, describes changes that are occurring in ways in which new and existing dental schools, expanded scope of practice for allied dental professionals, and dental therapists are helping to address access to care issues. Notably, Dr. Valachovic points out how a comparison between DTs, nurse practitioners (NPs), and physician assistants (PA) “misses the mark” because NPs and PAs must earn a master’s degree or clinical doctorate for entry into the profession. He also underscores the value of educating our students about the responsibility of all dental team members to function more productively.

Hopefully, these papers bring us closer to a working vision of dental therapy education and practice and a better understanding of the critical debate that impacts future dental education in the U.S. and globally.

I would like to recognize the work of the *JADE* Editorial Board members for serving as peer reviewers, providing input and feedback, and suggesting improvements. I hope you enjoy the issue and consider using it to initiate a discussion on DT in your classes and meetings. “As the field of dentistry evolves, and the lack of access to oral care persists, educating dental students and students in other health care professions about dental therapists should be an important task.”³

References

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 - 3 Webb P, Taylor RW, Reuben JS. A Dental Student's Perspective of Mid-level Providers in the Oral Healthcare Team. *Med Sci Educ*. 2021 Feb 2;31(2):885-887. doi: 10.1007/s40670-021-01203-3. PMID: 34457930; PMCID: PMC8368849.
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