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UPDATE

National Dental Association Condemns Racist Message Targeting Black Dentist

June 22, 2021, GREENBELT, MD – The National Dental Association (NDA), representing more than 7,000 oral health professionals, issued the following statement in response to a letter sent to Dr. Laila Hishaw a NDA member by Dr. Drew Jones, a dentist and former adjunct professor at Roseman University of Health Sciences, College of Dental Medicine in Utah:

Racism is a vicious societal scourge that has plagued America for more than 400 years. Sadly, racist beliefs, actions and institutions continue to pervade every aspect of American life. The National Dental Association itself was founded as a daring and creative response to the searing institutional racism in the Dental profession.

Since 1913, the NDA has maintained a zero-tolerance policy on racism whenever it has raised its ugly head both within the dental profession and society at-large. We have a historic role in bringing notions of diversity and equity to the forefront of all discussions with respect to the academic preparation of dentists, the practice of dentistry and the society in which we live and work. Dr. Laila Hishaw, a pediatric dentist in Arizona, is one such distinguished member of the NDA.

In an April 2021 ADA News op-ed entitled, “[Why Diversity in Dentistry Matters and How You Can Help](#),” Dr. Hishaw wrote movingly about the mentorship program she created to address the distressing statistic that the percentage of Black dentists in the United States ([3.8 percent](#)) has remained stagnant the last 15 years. Dr. Hishaw’s program strengthens the diversity pipeline from middle school to dental school and illuminates dentistry as a rewarding career.

Racial diversity in dentistry has [fallen woefully behind](#) that of the overall U.S. population. Data indicate that lack of diversity in health care often results in insufficient cultural competency and inequities in treatment, which [can lead to poor patient outcomes](#). It is imperative in addressing the oral health needs of an America,

NDA Family Organizations

which will be [majority minority by 2024](#), that we [nurture a diverse new generation](#) of dentists. Dr. Hishaw's innovative program is in the vanguard of that important effort.

Dr. Hishaw's op-ed is an exemplar of progressive action, and her commentary is in full alignment with and furtherance of the NDA's 108-year mission to promote "oral health equity among people of color by harnessing the collective power of its members, advocating for the needs of and mentoring dental students of color, and raising the profile of the profession in our communities."

Regrettably, Dr. Hishaw received a written response to her commentary from Dr. Drew Jones, who in words eerily reminiscent of the Jim Crow era mentality that our organization so boldly confronted at our inception, attacked both Dr. Hishaw's credibility and her right to speak out about the issue of diversity in dentistry. He condemned her practice locations asking, "Why aren't your clinics on the westside ... where there are many minorities and economically challenged people?" Wielding a tenuous patina of privilege, he opined on her appearance writing, "When I looked at your picture, I did not see a Black woman with 'tight kinky curls.'" Dr. Jones also implied that her graduation from a university with less than 3% black students delegitimizes her as a fighter for diversity. He ended the letter, "You talk the talk, but you don't walk the walk."

Dr. Hishaw was understandably alarmed by this abjectly racist screed, and she requested the support and advocacy of her home in organized dentistry, the historic voice of the underserved and marginalized communities within the oral health professions, the National Dental Association. We know the walk all too well. More than two-thirds of NDA members treat Medicaid patients, and we talk the talk, as our members have long been powerful thought leaders and eloquent spokespeople in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion within the dental profession.

The NDA and its members will never be lectured to on the subject of equity in the dental profession. We are on the front lines of delivering oral health care in the African American community and other communities of color. For more than a century, our devoted members have treated patients with compassion and professionalism in the communities from which we come. But racism is born of that insidious combination of ignorance and racial privilege and Dr. Jones' letter is a clear indication that both are alive and well within the dental profession.

In the era of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, America has become reawakened to the need for self-examination on the question of race. The mentality and actions that ended in their deaths and the mindset that caused Dr. Jones to write his letter must never go unchallenged if the American experiment is to continue into the next century.

The National Dental Association stands in lockstep with our member, Dr. Hishaw. We urge the ADA to censure its member, Dr. Jones. Dr. Jones' brazen letter reveals an ethos that is both dangerous and profoundly bigoted. We believe such attitudes to be disqualifying in anyone charged with the crucial responsibility of training the future cadre of oral health professionals. Racism is never benign. Such repugnant beliefs, when married with power, have injured, maimed, and destroyed. Dentistry is a healing profession, and, like justice, when it is at its best, it is restorative.

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About the NDA: The National Dental Association promotes oral health equity among people of color by harnessing the collective power of its members, advocating for the needs of and mentoring dental students of color, and raising the profile of the profession in our communities.

