

How Will Women Shape the Future of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery?

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Women account for a mere 8% of AAOMS members, and 10% of ACOMS members. This number is staggering as 31% of practicing dentists are women. So how do we as women shape the future of oral and maxillofacial surgery? In one word: unify. Oral surgery has long been understood as the “good ole boys club” or “a man’s profession,” but we can change that misconception as more women pursue OMS as a specialty. How does that happen? What does that look like?

Unification. This is twofold; first we must bring all oral surgeons, men and women together, to establish that we are all surgeons; not a male oral surgeon or a female oral surgeon, but just oral surgeons. As helpful as it is to have female support groups for OMS, we need to blend into one group of oral surgeons. A united front can achieve more together than any individual or small sect of the specialty. Clearly there are far more male surgeons than there are female, so utilizing our male colleagues to promote fair and equal treatment, as well as acceptance, of women within the specialty, will help to shape the overall future of OMS. Nearly 100% of the oral surgeons I trained with and have worked with are male, and they were all advocates for women within the specialty. They wanted me to be the best surgeon I could be, not just “good *female* surgeon.” Any group of people who can be more diversified will ultimately achieve more; they will have more to offer a widely diverse patient population and will bring multiple viewpoints and ideas to innovation within the specialty. Secondly, we as women within OMS must unify. Although we may not represent a large percentage of oral and maxillofacial surgeons, a strong united front can achieve change and inspire progress within our specialty. Women can, together, inspire new generations of female and male dentists to pursue OMS, making sure that we are upholding the standards on which this specialty was built. Ultimately, we want to train oral and maxillofacial surgeons who are proficient surgeons and good people – surgeons who recognize great surgical skills not just gender. No one wants an asterisk next to his or her name saying, “my surgeon was great *for being a girl.*” We want everyone to be excellent surgeons, regardless of gender (or race or ethnic background for that matter). I have been involved with sports my entire life, and one of the things that helped me in many situations is the TEAM concept. Together Everyone Achieves More. This can directly apply to OMS. Banded together we can all achieve more; we can provide better patient care, we can learn from one another, and we can continue to train excellent oral and maxillofacial surgeons to continue our legacies.

Positivity. Having a positive outlook on life is important. OMS training programs are difficult, tiring, and at times extremely frustrating. Of course, no one wants to be up all night seeing consults in the ER but treating those experiences as unique pieces to our learning puzzle can help to promote a positive attitude toward continuing education. Keeping a positive outlook aids in having the best experience in residency and practice as possible. That positivity also applies to how we treat others. There are always difficult patients, faculty, nurses, staff members and colleagues, but how we choose to deal with those people will emanate to others. More importantly, when we are treated negatively, choosing to deal with the situation in the most positive light possible will further our presence in the profession. For example, whether it is someone asking if we are strong enough to extract a tooth or questioning our treatment decisions, we can choose to take that situation and turn it into a way to promote our abilities, or we can negatively pass that attitude on to staff or other patients in future situations. Being able to address a patient's concerns without having a chip on our shoulder shows who we are as surgeons and more importantly who we are morally. Earning the respect of our staff, either in the office or in the operating room, is far easier to do when we are grateful and positive, rather than barking orders and being rude. Having a positive attitude toward all our experiences in practice, and using those experiences to either teach others or learn from will allow our specialty to shine. There is no place for negative attitudes or rude behavior, because ultimately it will negatively affect the patient, and we should always pride ourselves with providing the best care for patients. It can be easy to fall into a defensive attitude when someone questions our ability as surgeons, but choosing to be positive will speak volumes for our specialty and continue to promote oral surgeons in a positive light.

Presence. Taking part in organized dentistry is imperative. As Dr. Drew recently started her term as the president of ACOMS, she shows us that there are leadership positions available, and that we are seen as equals. With more women in leadership positions we can develop programs which target the recruitment of impeccable and talented individuals for oral and maxillofacial surgery – both women and men. Whether it is at the local level or national level, having women in leadership positions brings a different viewpoint to issues. As more women are involved with organized dentistry, specifically oral surgery, doors will open for more women to contribute to the forward progress of the profession. We must also be present within the community. Having a positive impact on those around us, through fundraising, sponsorship, or working with local schools will only bring more positive attention to oral and maxillofacial surgery. Gaining the respect of our community will shape how we as surgeons are viewed, and as we know some of our best referrals come from word of mouth, not only because of our abilities, but also due to our positive impact on the communities in which we live. Finally, being present

in dental schools and within oral surgery training programs is another way in which we will shape oral and maxillofacial surgery. Having a female presence in academics brings diversity to our programs, which allows for a more well-rounded trainee, male or female, and helps to provide additional insight in dealing with patients, staff, and colleagues.

Mentorship. The most important way that we can shape the future of oral and maxillofacial surgery is through mentorship. First, we need to mentor the women starting in dental school or even before. Being able to guide women through the application process or how to choose the best residency program is imperative to increasing the presence of women within the specialty. Having someone to answer questions about externships or what additional activities will best prepare her for residency. This can easily be done by male and female oral surgeons, which harkens back to the need for a unified front within our specialty. Secondly, mentorship programs should be present throughout residency programs. Having someone to talk to about surgery, work-life balance, and unfortunately how to deal with discrimination and or harassment will only make oral and maxillofacial surgery programs stronger. Being able to confront those who are being disrespectful and addressing problems will give women empowerment and confidence – which will directly impact patient treatment and care. If we are empowered and confident to make decisions without being judged or questioned, we are more likely to be viewed as equals within the specialty. Finally, mentorship should persist into practice, whether it be academics, private practice, or a combination of the two. Being able to have someone to approach about associateships, buy-ins, staffing, treatment plans, or how to deal with patients who refuse to acknowledge you as a doctor is immeasurable to a beginning surgeon. From personal experience, having someone to talk to about work-life balance is so important. Balancing motherhood and surgery is difficult at times, and knowing that someone is there to help guide you can be an amazing asset. By mentoring our surgeons throughout their career, we are able to provide strong surgeons to serve our communities. Knowing that there is someone else who has walked in your shoes aids in building confidence in our young surgeons, which in turn improves the future of oral and maxillofacial surgery. Having confident, compassionate, educated, and skilled surgeons mentoring the new crop of talent will continue to strengthen our specialty. If we want to shape the future of oral surgery we need to make sure that our rising surgeons are able to draw upon the experience of those who have walked before them.

Ultimately, women can bring so much to the specialty of oral and maxillofacial surgery. By unifying all surgeons and working toward increasing the number of women within the specialty, we are able to match the diversity that is seen in the real world; and therefore, we are able to serve our diverse

patient population. Having more women in leadership roles, academics, and training programs brings a more complete education for all trainees – both male and female. At the end of the day our goal should be training well rounded surgeons: surgeons with high morals, excellent surgical skills, exceptional patient care, and outstanding interpersonal communication. These qualities will help our young surgeons shine in their practices and within their communities, which directly promotes the specialty of oral and maxillofacial surgery. We are all surgeons who strive for the best patient care, and there should be no asterisk, no “she’s a great surgeon for being *female*,” rather we should work to make all people see oral surgery as a specialty of great surgeons, male and female alike. Unification, positivity, presence, and mentorship – these four principles will shape the future of oral and maxillofacial surgery. Together we *can* achieve more.