

By Dr. Rayna Strong

Re-imagining the dental profession: the whole person and our communal nature.

Our choices create our reality, not the other way around. What we deeply know without saying: love and community sustain human life. We need our whole selves and other people to thrive. Until dentistry becomes less elitist and separatist and more humanistic and communal, we are pretending to seek justice and health equity. We minimize the “good” to be done in our profession when we accept being a microcosm of the non-functional and unjust systems we exist within. Change that is real, concrete, and rooted in wisdom is available anytime we choose to do the work.

Oral health is inseparable from overall health, yet it is often treated as separate. We have an opportunity to fix the system with what we know of human biology and nature, but we choose not to. This collective choice, passive or intentional, aligns with dominant American cultural (white supremacist and patriarchal) tendencies towards separation, individuality, and elitism. These tendencies are counter to the well-being and interests of marginalized communities and most beneficial to the powerful elite. Given the opportunity to make significant reforms in the interest of our community, we also choose not to fix it. Why not? Do we genuinely want medical-dental integration? Do we genuinely want health equity? Who benefits so much from the current system that we are unwilling to address our glaring problems?

Uniting the dental system to create lasting change

As a profession with high overhead, high stress, and high lifestyle expectations, we push aside the part of our oath about justice. We choose security and separation over justice and goodness. The responsibility to do better could not be placed in more capable hands. Dentists are creative problem solvers, ingenious visionaries of what could be gifted healers, teachers, and advocates. Our collective skillset and social capital are more than enough to create a system that serves us all as a whole. Until our professional values and ethics align with our practice, we should be eager to do the work of re-inventing ourselves and our profession. We will do more good and less harm, and feel more joy and satisfaction by choosing what we know is best, instead of sustaining past problems.

How to begin...

Imagine the basic premise that the oral cavity, teeth, and enamel are all parts of the body, and there is only one health, and that dentistry is an exceptional art within whole person medicine. Imagine we understand our well-being is connected to that of every other being,

and we want everyone to flourish. Imagine we refuse to accept the major health disparities that give some of us a false sense of security and stability. Imagine that we boldly stand in a position to make health equity a reality for the communities that sustain all of us. Imagine the type of collective work that existed in ancient cultures that brought us the great pyramids and advanced knowledge. As communal and connected people, we can advocate for one another's good, change systems, and create a dental profession that works better for everyone. We have to be honest about how we want to be in the world—as a profession and as practitioners— and then be genuine and relentless in our efforts towards it. Consider neglecting whole-person health and social justice, no longer an option.