



From Vietnam to Boston: Making a difference in the public's oral health

Dr. Allukian treating patients at a Vietnamese refugee camp in Da Nang, Vietnam in 1965.



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AFTER GRADUATING FROM the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine in 1964, Myron Allukian Jr., DDS, MPH, enlisted in the Navy to see the world. He ended up in Vietnam at the 3rd Marine Division Field Hospital for mass casualties and initiated a dental program for the three orphanages and schools in the Da Nang area, providing dental care to a population that likely never received care other than an extraction by a "sidewalk dentist."

"International dentistry became my life goal and before returning to the United States, I decided to make that my career, going to developing countries and helping people who had no other choice but to live with pain and infection because they didn't have a source of dental care," Dr. Allukian says. Once he returned to the United States, though, he says he saw even greater needs in his own state.

An internationally recognized dental public health expert, Dr. Allukian currently is president of the Massachusetts Coalition for Oral Health, vice president of the American Fluoridation Society, vice chair of the Oral Health Working Group of the World Federation of Public Health Associations, and a member of the National Academy of Medicine since 1991. He serves on the faculty of Harvard, Tufts and Boston universities' dental schools and also works with AEGD and dental public health residents in Massachusetts for NYU Langone Health, in addition to other public health activities.

Here, he discusses his career in public health and what dental students today can do to make a difference in the world.



CONTOUR: Describe your career path after returning to the United States from Vietnam.

DR. MYRON ALLUKIAN JR.: When I came back to Boston, I showed pictures of my work in Vietnam to one of my dental friends, who suggested that I meet with Dr. James M. Dunning, the chair of ecological dentistry and former dean of the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. Dr. Dunning suggested that I spend three years as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard in dental public health to be more effective with public health training and developing a community or population perspective. It made sense to me.

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—MYRON ALLUKIAN JR., DDS, MPH



While in my training as a postdoctoral fellow, I was asked to speak at a legislative hearing on fluoridation at the State House.

I was shocked to learn that Massachusetts teenagers had six times more tooth decay than Vietnamese teenagers. Millions of Americans did not have access to dental care, and many children and high-risk populations in the United States were suffering every day with pain and infection. Early in my career, I couldn't understand how in such a rich country, [so many Americans] were unnecessarily suffering with dental disease.

What are some of your accomplishments throughout your career?

I helped Massachusetts go from being 7 percent fluoridated to 63 percent, with over 4 million people now having its health and economic benefits. I also got fluoridation and dental health included in the 1990 national prevention objectives (now called Healthy People 2020), which was expanded upon. In addition, I did the first epidemiological study of a fluoride enamel biopsy in a fluoridated and non-fluoridated community.

As the city of Boston dental director from 1970 to 2004, I developed one of the first homeless dental programs in the United States, which is still operating today. I initiated and/or supported 18 health center dental programs in Boston with over 100,000 patient



Dr. Allukian meeting with Senator Edward Kennedy in Washington, D.C., in 1999.



Dr. Allukian speaking at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., in 1991.

visits per year, becoming the health center model statewide with more than 600,000 patient visits per year now. I also played a national leadership role in the 1980s to improve access to dental care for people with HIV/AIDS, which resulted in the CDC guidelines for infection control being moved forward. In 2005, I took a national leadership role to demonstrate the safety and effectiveness of the Alaska dental therapists, who have since been providing care to thousands in rural Alaska.

How did you go about achieving these goals?

None of this gets done by one person alone. Use the three Ps: patience, persistence and perseverance. Be evidence-based in your proposals and programs. Keep your eyes on your goals and develop partnerships and relationships. Develop a constituency and work through organized community efforts and constant networking. You can only have sustained change if you work with your colleagues, your community and its leaders, multidisciplinary agencies and organizations while being responsive to the needs of those you are helping in the community.

What can students do now to make a difference?

Provide the best evidence-based quality care you can. Spend time with your patients, educating them about how to improve their oral health knowledge, skills and behaviors. Educate them about the health and economic benefits of community water fluoridation, as there is so much misinformation on the internet.

If your patients come from a fluoridated community, let them know they are fortunate to live in a fluoridated community because they have less tooth decay, infections and lower dental bills. If your patients come from a non-fluoridated community, educate them about the benefits of fluoridation. If every student in your class and school did this with every new patient and during recall visits, you will be making an enormous impact on the oral health of that community. This change should start with students working with ASDA to incorporate fluoridation education for all patients at their school. If one school makes it a policy, they can be a leader in dental education.

How can we make an impact after graduation?

By educating all of your patients about proper oral health and hygiene and about the benefits of community water fluoridation. Be a Medicaid provider. Get involved in your community, whether it's a local board of health, the PTA, the school board, your local and state dental societies or a community organization. If your patients' communities are not fluoridated, help them achieve that.

You will be among the most educated in your community — don't let it go to waste by just using it in your office. Give back and keep up with evidence-based studies. You have a great future; invest in and take advantage of the opportunities to serve society, not only in your practice but outside of it as well. ●