

From the Guest Editors

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During the planning for this oral health edition of the Delaware Journal of Public Health, Dr. Cole recalled a story that was shared by a professor while he was a student at Georgetown University School of Dentistry. The oral surgeon spoke about his first day of deployment to a field hospital during the Vietnam War. His commanding officer, a physician and surgeon told him, “Put your thumb in your mouth and stretch out the rest of your fingers. If you can touch it, it’s yours. The rest is mine. Now get to work!” While this encounter showed a unique approach to defining scope of practice, it also illustrated the disintegration that often existed between medicine and dentistry; mutual coexistence instead of collaboration in the treatment of patients. Integration of medicine and dentistry stresses the importance of oral health as an essential part of overall health.

For decades, oral health has been defined by national and international groups in dentistry and medicine as the absence of disease and associated symptoms of the oral cavity and oropharynx. The FDI World Dental Federation has developed a definition for oral health that is designed to bridge the gaps that sometimes exist between oral healthcare and overall health of the body. The FDI defines oral health in this way:

“Oral health is multifaceted and includes the ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, touch, chew, swallow, and convey an array of emotions through facial expressions with confidence and without pain, discomfort and disease of the craniofacial complex.”

They further identify attributes of oral health.

“Oral health is a fundamental component of health and physical and mental well-being. It exists along a continuum influenced by the values and attitudes of individuals and communities. Oral health reflects the physiological, social and psychological attributes that are essential to the quality of life. Oral health is influenced by an individual’s changing experiences, perceptions, expectations, and ability to adapt to circumstances.”

When strategically addressing the promotion of oral health, there is a lot of discussion around access to care, but less attention to two essential components of success in this area: utilization of services and oral health literacy. It is with this background that we hope this edition of the Delaware Journal of Public Health will inspire the multidisciplinary team of healthcare providers and advocates to continue to add to their comprehensive understanding of oral health, the challenges we face, and the

opportunities we have in working together. You cannot have systemic health without oral health.

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