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FACULTY AND ALUMNI MENTORS SUPPORT STUDENT WELLNESS, ACADEMIC GOALS

THIS YEAR FOR THE FIRST TIME, all first-year students at Penn Dental Medicine met one-on-one with Dr. Uri Hangorsky, Associate Dean for Student Life, Admissions and PASS, to go over their career options and plans, the opportunities and resources available at the school, and to discuss whether they would like to be matched with a faculty or alumni mentor.

Although mentors previously have been available to students, this year there has been a renewed focus on encouraging students to connect with a mentor who can help provide advice, guidance, and support on a variety of academic, professional, and personal issues. It's part of a broader effort, both at Penn Dental Medicine and the University of Pennsylvania, to focus on student wellness initiatives (see box on the right).

"This school is a big place, and it's helpful for students to have a faculty member or alumnus focused on their needs," Dr. Hangorsky says. It's also a way for students to interact more closely with specialists and practicing dentists and start to think about their career options.

The need can vary by student. "Some students are children of dentists, their families are local and they have a large support system," Dr. Hangorsky notes. "But many are far away from home, and the opportunity to interact with another individual in the same field, who they can talk to confidentially and ask for advice, is a huge boost. A mentor can be an advocate for the student."

The interactions between student and mentor will vary, but can include work shadowing, academic and career advising, social activities, research opportunities, professional networking and, often, a friendly and supportive person to talk to.

OPPOSITE: (top left) Alumni mentor Dr. Shari Leavitt (D'87) with mentees Kristen Leong (D'21), seated, and Sujeong Lee (D'21). (bottom left) Dr. Uri Hangorsky talking with students. (bottom right) Faculty mentor Dr. Neeraj Panchal with mentees Jonathan Griffin (D'20) and Sarina Dodhia (D'20).

There has been a high level of interest this year in connecting with a mentor. Over the past three years, approximately 150 students in the DMD program have been assigned mentors, notes Sue Schwartz, Assistant Dean for Student Life. And while some students initially don't seek out a mentor, they hear about positive experiences some of their classmates are having and come in later to request one.

To facilitate a good match, students are asked if they prefer a faculty or alumni mentor and what their interests are, including career objectives, research, community service, honors programs or other areas. If they know where they want to live and work, students can be assigned alumni mentors who are working throughout the country or they can be matched with someone right here in the Philadelphia area.

And while particular focus is on assigning mentors for freshmen, Dr. Hangorsky says students can come in any time during their studies to request a mentor. "Sometimes second- or third-year students may struggle, either didactically, clinically or emotionally, and we assign a mentor and that often turns things around."

For Sarina Dodhia (D'20), who has sought out mentors for school, dance, and sports in the past, requesting a mentor at Penn Dental Medicine didn't give her a moment's pause. "I have gained so much from this experience," says Dodhia, who was paired with faculty mentor Dr. Neeraj Panchal her freshman year. "Guidance from an individual who has walked our path is invaluable and something we cannot obtain from a textbook or lecture."

The success of the mentoring program depends greatly on the faculty and alumni mentors, from a variety of specialties and geographic locations, who volunteer to help guide and support the students. Following are the experiences of two mentors and some of the students they have advised.

Student Wellness Programs/Resources

With student wellness a critically important issue at Penn Dental Medicine and throughout the University of Pennsylvania, Penn Dental Medicine is continuing to develop a variety of resources and programming to promote student wellness. In addition to faculty and alumni mentoring, some of these resources include:

WELLNESS COURSES: Starting this year, students are required to take at least one wellness selective course of the five total selective credits required for traditional DMD students and the four credits required for PASS students.

STUDENT CLUBS: Several student clubs offer wellness programs, including a wellness week sponsored by ASDA (American Student Dental Association). And the Office of Student Life organized a wellness event in April 2018 in collaboration with Penn's Counseling and Psychological Services.

FRESHMAN ORIENTATION INITIATIVES: An increased emphasis on wellness as part of freshman orientation was introduced for the 2016-2017 academic year, with additional programming added this year.

FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS with administrators where students can share concerns and learn about support resources:

Morning coffee with the Dean: Initiated this March, students are invited to meet with Interim Dean Dana Graves for coffee and open-ended conversations

Lunchtime Open Hours: The Office of Academic Affairs and Student Life has initiated a monthly lunchtime open hour for students to mingle and speak with staff.

Monthly Town Hall Meetings: The Offices of Academic Affairs and Student Life host monthly meetings, open to all DMD students, as a forum for sharing concerns and facilitating discussions.

COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES: A University counselor is available to meet with Penn Dental Medicine students three evenings a week, up from two evenings last year.

UNIVERSITY-WIDE INITIATIVES INCLUDE:

Wellness at Penn: This recently launched website provides a central spot for support, resources and practical tools on eight kinds of wellness at Penn, including emotional, physical, social, mental, sexual, spiritual, financial and occupational: www.wellnessatpenn.com.

Take Your Professor/Mentor to Lunch & Faculty Hosted Dinner: To foster stronger professor/mentor-student bonds, students can invite professors, teaching assistants, advisors or staff members for a free lunch at the University Club. And faculty members can host a class dinner in their home and be reimbursed per student by Penn.



FACULTY MENTOR: DR. NEERAJ PANCHAL

Dr. Neeraj Panchal, Instructor, Department of Oral Surgery/Pharmacology, credits many of his own “amazing” mentors with motivating him to pursue a career in academic dentistry and oral surgery. Thus, he had no hesitation about paying this forward when asked if he was interested in mentoring Penn Dental Medicine students.

In fact, in an abundance of enthusiasm, he is currently mentoring nine first- and second-year Penn Dental Medicine students, taking time to meet them for dinner, providing insights into dental school and oral and maxillofacial surgery, offering opportunities to shadow in the clinic and operating room, as well as work on research projects.

“My goals for the program are quite simple, and that is to encourage our students to have well-balanced personal and professional lives,” says Dr. Panchal, also Section Chief of Oral Maxillofacial Surgery for Penn Presbyterian Medical Center. “We want to make sure our students do well in all aspects of their lives.”

His dedication is apparent to his mentees. When Sarina Dodhia (D’20) had questions about whether to apply for the Research Honors Program last year, she texted Dr. Panchal on his cell phone, and just a few minutes later she received a call from him to discuss the issue.

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— JONATHAN GRIFFIN (D’20)

Dodhia views Dr. Panchal as a mentor, academic and career advisor, and general sounding board on a variety of issues. “Knowing I have a mentor who is willing to go above and beyond for me has positively impacted my well-being during these stressful years in dental school,” she said. In terms of career development, she says Dr. Panchal provided an opportunity for her to write and present two research papers on oral and maxillofacial surgery and network with residents.

Dr. Panchal, who also meets with several additional students each month who are interested in oral surgery careers, says in addition to providing educational and career guidance he tries to provide a comfortable place for students to discuss their aspirations and concerns and, sometimes, just vent.

“It was not too long ago that I went through the same hurdles that they are going through,” he says. “I know what it’s like to manage multiple classes, exams, clinical work, research, volunteer work and shadowing — besides all the other things in their lives.”

He’s introduced mentees to private practitioners to gain insights and connected several students to colleagues serving as oral maxillofacial surgeons in the military. “I have a couple of students interested in military service, and their dedication and willingness to serve our country is an inspiration to me,” he notes.

“Mentoring with Dr. Panchal has been a great experience,” says Jonathan Griffin (D’20), noting that every semester Dr. Panchal takes his mentees to dinner to catch up, talk about the ups and downs of school, and get to know each other on a personal level. Academically, Griffin is working with Dr. Panchal on a case report manuscript with the

goal of having it published, and also hopes to shadow him on surgical procedures.

“The insight and knowledge gained from Dr. Panchal has helped me grow as a student both personally and professionally,” Griffin says. “Throughout the stresses of school, it is incredibly reassuring to know you have someone in your corner.”

And the benefits go both ways. “Mentorship is my favorite part of being in academic oral and maxillofacial surgery,” Dr. Panchal says. “The ability to develop relationships with trainees and help them pursue their dreams is a major reason why I am in academics.”

When a Penn undergraduate interested in dentistry asked to shadow her back in 2011, Penn Dental Medicine alumna Dr. Shari Leavitt, (D '87), didn't hesitate. "It was so enjoyable," she recalls. "She looked through my textbooks, came into the operatory with me to view fillings and extractions and learned about running a dental practice."

That student was Shin Young Ahn (D'16), who is now a full-time dentist in Dr. Leavitt's practice, University Square Dental Associates, in West Philadelphia. "I wasn't looking for an associate at that time," Dr. Leavitt says, but has since found the addition of another dentist to her staff to be "life changing."

That positive experience has made Dr. Leavitt into somewhat of a "super mentor" among Penn Dental Medicine alumni. She estimates she has mentored more than 50 undergraduate and dental students since Dr. Ahn first reached out to her, many of them connecting through word of mouth or referred by the Penn Dental Medicine alumni office. The students have gone on to dental schools in New York, Boston, and San Francisco, among other places, including two currently enrolled in Penn Dental Medicine.

Some of the students have worked as paid employees during gap years between college and dental school, while others have come for shorter periods of time to learn,



ALUMNI MENTOR: DR. SHARI LEAVITT (D '87)

for a year before starting at Penn Dental Medicine last fall. Besides providing experience in dentistry, Dr. Leavitt helped guide her through the dental school admissions process. It was the start of an ongoing and rewarding relationship.

"She is not only a great career mentor, she is a great life coach as well," Lee says. "I can talk to her about my personal struggles. I also feel that she genuinely believes in me

Kristen Leong (D'21) started shadowing Dr. Leavitt as a Penn undergraduate, spending four hours a week at her office. "It gave me a lot of context for the things I'm learning." In addition, she says Dr. Leavitt has helped her keep her perspective while in a challenging program, encouraging her to make time for relaxation and to take advantage of living in Philadelphia.

For her part, Dr. Leavitt says she hopes to provide an honest accounting of what it's like to be a dentist. "Dental school is not easy, practicing is not easy," she notes, and says it gives her a good feeling to help guide and support the students. "I also enjoy their enthusiasm," she says. "It brings me back to how excited I was to be in dental school." ■

— By Debbie Goldberg

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— SUJEONG LEE (D'21)

observe, and see if they are on the right career path. "I ask, 'Can you foresee doing what I'm doing?'" says Dr. Leavitt, who exposes the mentees to dental care and procedures, explains basic restorative and dental terminology, and teaches them to read x-rays. "As much as they're willing to absorb," she says.

Sujeong Lee (D'21) reached out to Dr. Leavitt as an undergraduate at Drexel University and ended up working in her office

and that really motivates me to do my best."

Technology can make it easy to stay in touch. Lee texts Dr. Leavitt if she has concerns or questions, and has sent photos of her first laboratory preparations. Dr. Leavitt says she's been sent photos from students excited when they received their dental supplies, or showing her an amalgam they've done.

BECOME A MENTOR

Interested in mentoring? Please contact Lindsay Murphy in the Office of Development and Alumni Relations at 215-898-8023 or alumni@dental.upenn.edu and we'll add you to the list of alumni we share with DMD and pre-dental students looking for a mentor. In the coming year, we are looking to evolve the program and find new ways to engage our alumni mentors.