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— DEAN MARK WOLFF

WELCOMING DEAN MARK WOLFF

A CONVERSATION WITH THE NEW DEAN OF PENN DENTAL MEDICINE

IN JULY, Penn Dental Medicine welcomed Dr. Mark S. Wolff as its new Morton Amsterdam Dean. With his appointment, he became the twelfth dean to lead the School of Dental Medicine since its founding in 1878.

Dean Wolff's eagerness to connect with the Penn Dental Medicine community was apparent from the start. He began his first official day on campus greeting faculty, staff, and students with coffee, donuts, and an open invitation to meet and talk, spending the day visiting throughout the School. Indeed, a commitment to building and strengthening ties within the Penn Dental Medicine community is a priority for Dean Wolff. Since arriving, he has hosted a reception for faculty and staff as a thank you for their contributions, organized town halls meetings and individual class lunches to hear from students, planned a series of events to meet alumni, and is regularly carving out time in his schedule to visit students, patients, and faculty in the School's clinics. In fact, when talking with Dean Wolff about taking on this leadership post, community emerges as a common theme — from how he views the

culture he wants to promote within the School to the role he sees for the School, students, and practicing clinicians.

Dean Wolff, who also holds an appointment as Professor in the Department of Preventive & Restorative Sciences, comes to Penn Dental Medicine from the College of Dentistry at New York University (NYU), where he served since 2005, most recently as Professor and Chair of Cariology and Comprehensive Care and Senior Associate Dean for Development and Alumni Relations.

He brought bold and innovative thinking to his role at NYU, where he led more than 400 faculty and staff. Among programs there, Dean Wolff designed and implemented the world's largest electronic dental-health record and fully digital imaging system. He also led a school-wide initiative to emphasize duty, altruism, and community service as foundational components of the educational



program and expanded interprofessional educational opportunities for students. Also notable has been his commitment to local and global engagement and to serving individuals with disabilities.

Dean Wolff holds both a DDS (1981) and PhD (1997) from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook, where he also served on the faculty for more than two decades before going to NYU.

Just about two months into his deanship, we sat down with Dean Wolff to talk with him about his personal and professional path to Penn Dental Medicine and his goals and visions going forward.

Share a bit about your path into dentistry — what interested you in the field of dental medicine?

I was originally drawn to dentistry by my family dentist. I not only liked what he did, I liked that he got to work with people and families year after year as an integral part of the community, and I decided to pursue family practice dentistry. After graduation and a residency in general dentistry, I opened my practice in Stony Brook, N.Y., not far from the dental school where I graduated. I was there for 36 years, and in fact, I just closed it before starting the deanship. As dentists, we get to make people smile — that is an incredible profession.

How did you transition to academics?

From the time I finished my residency, I volunteered at Stony Brook, teaching in the clinic. I would go in on Fridays — a day they had difficulty getting faculty to cover. It was in 1987 that I decided to pursue teaching full-time. A family tragedy prompted me to reassess my life at that time, and I decided I wanted to do something that I felt could leave a greater mark on humanity. So, I went back to school to earn my PhD and put in more time teaching, while cutting back on my practice. Shortly after that, I became Director of Operative Dentistry at Stony Brook and continued on there in a variety of teaching and administrative roles, including Director of the Advanced Education in General Dentistry program and Associate Dean for Informatics. I made the move to NYU in 2005.

What have you found most rewarding about teaching/academics?

First, there is nothing better than being paid to learn. As a faculty member, part of my obligation is to be at the leading edge of education and technology and that means each day I wake up and have to learn something new. I look at it as an everyday task. Second, as an instructor, you can have a tremendous impact on students and the way they ultimately practice depending upon your attitude as a teacher. And then, you look at the patient populations served by dental schools — we provide dental care to people who frequently



cannot find care elsewhere. When you add all this up, the opportunity we have within a dental school is remarkable, and I take it very seriously. It is such a mentally stimulating environment.

What are some of your top priorities for the School in the coming year?

One of my top priorities is to create an environment that makes everybody happy to come to work and school. I look at that as one of my greatest goals this first year. I want it to become a personal experience where the faculty, staff, and students know the Dean cares for them, and they care for the School and each other. I also want to see mentorship on all levels. If that alone were my first year's accomplishment, it would be great, but I think we'll do that and much more.

I understand you've been a lifelong advocate/provider for individuals with developmental disabilities — how did that evolve?

Yes, that's been a passion since dental school. I had an instructor at Stony Brook who I consider my personal mentor — Fred Ferguson. He ensured we had competence in managing and treating persons with developmental disabilities. After graduation, I built my practice pointed in that direction; I reached out to the medical community so they knew my practice was a resource for the disabled.

CBS just had a report that said 1 in 7 Americans have a significant disability — that is an incredible challenge to manage from a dental standpoint if every dentist doesn't have comfort and competence treating this population. We are not only talking about developmental disabilities, but also conditions like Parkinson's, MS, or stroke and trauma. With the aging population, we have more and more people every day entering this disability category. We have done a great job at educating students on medical issues and complexities in regard to oral health, but dental schools have to do much more to make them comfortable and capable in treating these patients.

What do you see doing in this regard here?

I think Penn is in a unique position, for we have so many leaders across disciplines. We need to help design the evidence-based care protocols that can be used to properly and efficiently treat individuals with a broad spectrum of disabilities throughout the life span. We need to have a care facility here at Penn Dental Medicine focused on treating patients with some form of disability to give our students significant hands-on experience. And then, we need to start preparing the continuing education programs necessary for dentists in practice who may just be uncomfortable delving into this area. We can't

be taking everyone to an operating room to clean their teeth, so we need to define the methodologies, train the caregiver and the students to maintain oral health. I would like to see Penn Dental Medicine be the source to say to a mother or son or spouse, here is information on how to manage your loved one's oral health, and those protocols would be Penn generated. That is the type of thing in which I think we can take leadership.

What do you think are some of the greatest challenges in preparing students to enter the dental field today?

There is a plethora of technologies entering the dental field today at such a fast pace and that will only continue to accelerate, so we need to make students excellent lifelong learners. And by that, I don't simply mean through continuing education courses, but by staying informed through evidence-based literature. They need to learn how to function in an environment where there is so much information out there, so they can sort through it and discern trusted sources to make decisions that are in the best interest of their patients.

What role do you see the dental school playing in the community?

I think the dental school is obliged to help improve the quality of life in the community that hosts us. We can help raise the dental education level and provide oral health screenings and general health screenings that elevate the health of the community overall. While the school is already doing some wonderful outreach, expanding our community efforts is a top priority for me. One area in particular where I believe we can make a significant impact is with the senior population at senior centers and nursing homes. I foresee us bringing patients from such centers here and taking our students there.

As a founding member of the American Academy of Cariology, tell me a bit about that organization/your role there.

There had never been an organization that talked to the management of tooth decay. The American Academy of Cariology was set up to do just that — to act as an advocate for oral health care as it relates to tooth decay. There have long been specialty organizations related to other oral disease, but nothing ever existed related to caries, the number one oral disease. Even within the American Dental Education Association (ADEA), there was no section that focused on tooth decay. So first, I joined with colleagues to help create the caries special interest group in ADEA, and then in 2010, the ADEA section on cariology and served as its founding councilor. After that, we felt we had to do more to represent caries as a disease nationally, so two years ago, we launched the Academy.

The part of it that I Chair focuses on developing educational resources related to caries for both professionals and the community, which fits well with what I do. As it turns out, we can do some very good

predicting about tooth decay risk, like determining who will not get tooth decay and who will always get it. These patients need to be treated differently. Through the development of caries management by risk assessment (CAMBRA), there is a series of metrics in the electronic health record that help students determine how to manage the patient's tooth decay risk. Not all tooth decay needs to be surgically restored but does need a dentist to intervene. We have the ability today to reverse or stabilize a spot we see in an x-ray before it becomes a caries lesion. I look at the restoration as a failure of everything I stand for in caries prevention and reversal. Here at Penn, while caries prevention is part of our students' education, we are going to expand it further and further as time goes by.

What are your key research interests?

While my earlier research focused on dental materials and I also worked with Colgate on a toothpaste, I moved to trying to figure out how to manage populations with tooth decay and how we reduce that risk over time. So what methods can we use to control a non-

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communicable disease for which we know the risk, the causes, and how to manage it, and yet, it persists? That's health implementation and that's what I spend my time doing.

One of my prouder moments in this area was the "Smile Granada" program we did at NYU. It launched in 2010, when we took a group of students to Granada to assess the dental health of the country's children. In two weeks, we examined 1,075 children and found 83% had cavities, and on average, they had nine cavities each. It was a crisis that the island's dozen or so dentists could not manage alone, so we worked with the Ministries of Health and Education to design an early-childhood prevention program that essentially turned schools into dental health centers. I took dental students to schools and we trained hundreds of teachers on how to implement a daily, two-minute brushing regimen with students. We also showed them how to apply fluoride varnishes, which they did three times a year. Students were given toothbrushes that they kept at school. It was a great success; two and half years into the program, new cavities in school-aged children dropped 75%. It was the perfect meeting of the willing educator and a child in need.

Having served as Senior Associate Dean for Development and Alumni Relations at NYU, you bring a unique perspective on engaging with alumni — what do you look forward to in that regard with our alumni?

I look forward to connecting with alumni so they can get to know who I am. I think one of the most important things we can do is use our alumni as a source for understanding what we do well and what we could do better. I also want us to understand their needs and be a support system, whether they are looking for associates or looking for answers to questions. Nothing flatters me more than to have former students call and say I have a question about this material I read about, what are your thoughts? Helping to strengthen those ties alumni have to our school is one of the biggest things I can potentially do as Dean.

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ABOVE: Dean Wolff devoted his first day at Penn Dental Medicine to visiting with students, faculty, and staff throughout the School and is routinely carving out time in his schedule to spend time in the clinical care areas talking with students, faculty, and patients.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Dean Wolff with Penn Dental Medicine Alumni Board Chair Dr. Eric Spieler (D'84), who teaches in the Dept. of Preventive & Restorative Sciences.

On a personal note, how do you enjoy spending time away from work?

Family is very important to me and my wife, Barbara. I'm extremely close to all of our extended family members, so they are a very critical part of who we are. I love gardening; check out the dahlias in the office — they are from my garden at our home on Long Island. We have a boat, and I enjoy saltwater fishing with family and friends, and also enjoy doing household construction projects — my daughter and I finished our basement. Travel and photography is another passion. I scuba dive and have done a lot of underwater photography. I've been blessed with opportunities to lecture around the world and explore and photograph the areas I've visited. Everything I do I do with a desire to do it well. That is another reason I'm excited to be here at Penn, for Penn has the desire to be the best and do groundbreaking work; together with the Penn community, I'm ready to do just that. ■