

# A PASSION FOR PUBLIC HEALTH DENTISTRY

MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH DUAL-DEGREE PROGRAM EXPANDS GRADUATES' PERSPECTIVES AND SUPPORTS THEIR DESIRE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

FOR DENTAL STUDENTS WITH A PASSION for serving the underserved and confronting disparities in oral healthcare, Penn Dental Medicine offers the opportunity to pursue a Master of Public Health (MPH) alongside their DMD – one of the unique dual-degree options made possible through the close interdisciplinary ties with Penn's other schools.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of this offering in conjunction with Penn's Perelman School of Medicine, a program that continues to have a far-reaching impact on the career paths of graduates and the patients they serve. Through coursework in public health, graduates broaden their understanding of how oral health and public health intersect, and how oral health issues in communities around the world can be addressed – and changed – through community-based efforts, including advocacy, public policy, program development and implementation, and research.

This dual-degree option complements Penn Dental Medicine's decades-long commitment to promoting equitable oral health for all through its service learning and community care partnerships, bolstered recently through new initiatives like the School's first policy center, the Center for Integrative

Global Oral Health (currently developing a new master's program in oral and population health) and its Care Center for Persons with Disabilities, through which all fourth-year students now rotate. The MPH is one of the six School-funded dual degrees that Penn Dental Medicine students can pursue over the 4 years of their DMD program.

"The MPH program provides talented students with the opportunity to expand their knowledge and skills in the various aspects of public health," says Dr. Joan Gluch, Chief of the Division of Community Oral Health, who helped to establish the MPH dual degree. "By participating in classes with students and faculty from Penn's Perelman School of Medicine and the Schools of Nursing and Social Policy and Practice, these dual-degree students also ensure that oral health is highlighted as an essential part of healthcare and public health."

Since establishing the MPH dual degree in 2012, 23 Penn Dental Medicine graduates have earned a MPH along with their DMD, and there are seven current students in the program (see list, page 36). Of the graduates, the majority (17) work with vulnerable and underserved populations. Many entered postdoctoral programs after graduation (8 went on to GPR/AEGD residencies, 8 to pediatric dentistry, 2 to oral medicine, and 3 to oral surgery), while two went directly into practice. They work in diverse settings that include clinical and community practices, universities, hospitals, and the military. We recently reconnected with three alumni, talking to them about their experience as a MPH dual-degree graduate and where they are now – their profiles follow. Though their paths are varied, their goals are similar: to serve vulnerable populations and alter the status quo.

OPPOSITE (L TO R): Current MPH dual-degree students include Jeremy Budd, Annie Shtino, Danielle Silver, Neelam Vohra, Alexis Till, Kate Trieschman, and (not pictured) Zaara Baig.



“The MPH dual-degree program has been an incredible addition to my DMD curriculum. I feel fortunate to be able to expand my understanding of public health in collaboration with other students from varying graduate programs and to challenge myself to examine the intersection of population health and dentistry.”

— NEELAM VOHRA, D’24

## EDUCATE, ENGAGE, EMPOWER

For Dr. Roopali Kulkarni, (D'19, GR'19, GD'21), her Penn Dental Medicine journey has come full circle — from dual degree DMD/MPH student and oral medicine resident to a full-time member of the School's faculty, developing her passion for public oral health along the way and putting her on a career path in academic dentistry. With her recent appointment to the Department of Oral Medicine faculty, Dr. Kulkarni is using her public health perspective to inform her new role as a teacher, researcher, and academic clinician.

Dr. Kulkarni understood from an early age that good healthcare was not easily accessible to all. As a student at Northwestern University, she threw herself into community outreach, working with refugee and homeless populations in the greater Chicago area. "I learned that oral healthcare is a unique and important part of public health," she says.

Before dental school, she took a gap year to work with a general dentist and in public health research, exploring the correlation between cognitive function and health literacy in older adults. She found both experiences motivational, and once at Penn Dental Medicine it didn't take much contemplation on her part to apply for the MPH dual degree.

### CHALLENGING AND REWARDING

Tackling both her DMD and MPH at once, while challenging, turned out to be the right decision for Dr. Kulkarni: "The interdisciplinary nature of the MPH program allowed me to meet and work with professionals in many different fields who would become my future colleagues," she recalls. "For me, it brought the world of healthcare together, while also offering me a broader perspective."

An important aspect of her growth as a dentist and a public health advocate has been using her knowledge and voice to promote public policy change. As a Penn Dental Medicine student, she served as national president of the American Student Dental Association, a group of 24,000, leading lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill for policies in oral healthcare. She has continued



**ROOPALI KULKARNI, (D'19, GR'19, GD'21)**  
**INSTRUCTOR, DEPT. OF ORAL MEDICINE, PENN DENTAL MEDICINE**

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her work in organized dentistry as a national media spokesperson for the American Dental Association and a representative of the Pennsylvania Dental Association, the Philadelphia County Dental Society, and the American Academy Oral Medicine, advocating for high-quality oral healthcare for all.

"I believe in the power of pushing boundaries to make things better," she says. "Changes in policy truly can lead to changes in practice."

For her capstone MPH project, Dr. Kulkarni chose a topic that would further her love of research -- a study of pediatric dental patients that explored how the health literacy of parents and caregivers affected the young patients' outcomes. Studying children with

chronic illnesses as well as healthy children, she found that while the caregivers of chronically ill patients were more knowledgeable about other areas of medicine, their knowledge of oral healthcare was no higher than the caregivers of the healthy group, which was generally low. Dr. Kulkarni concluded that all caregivers of children needed to be "educated, engaged and empowered" in regard to oral healthcare, a phrase that has come to sum up her overall approach to public oral health.

After graduating with her dual DMD and MPH degrees in 2019, pursuing a postdoctoral degree in oral medicine at Penn Dental Medicine came naturally. "Oral medicine is the integration of dentistry and



medicine, and promotes oral healthcare as a critical component of overall health,” she says. “I see it as the intersection of dentistry and public health.” Her residency coincided with all of the challenges and learning opportunities of the Covid-19 pandemic. “I became chief resident in my second year and gained experience in both inpatient and outpatient settings,” she notes.

### PAYING IT FORWARD

Today, as a full-time faculty member, Dr. Kulkarni finds she loves teaching, especially the rewarding “light bulb moments” when her students understand important concepts and how they fit together. She currently teaches predoctoral and postdoctoral students clinically, in the Oral Medicine and Personalized Care Suite clinics, and didactically, on a wide range of subjects relating to oral medicine and interdisciplinary care. Her scholarly work focuses on both oral medicine and public health. Dr. Kulkarni serves as an attending at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, as assistant director of the oral residency program, and treats patients at Penn Medicine Radnor.

She values working alongside her former mentors, who are now trusted colleagues. “I have been so fortunate with the mentors I have had, and I find the best way to pay it back is to pay it forward and empower the next generation,” she says. In doing so, she finds she uses her MPH training every day: “It has truly shaped my role as a dentist.”

### ANOTHER SIDE OF HEALTHCARE

As the third generation of a family of dentists in Honolulu, Hawaii, Dr. Matt Oishi’s, (D’15, GR ’15), plan had always been to return to his home state after dental school. First, however, he wanted to learn all that he could — not only about dentistry, but also about dental public health — with the goals of serving underrepresented patients back home. He did just that — not only earning an MPH and DMD at Penn Dental Medicine, but going on to become board certified in Dental Public Health. Today, in his native Hawaii, Dr. Oishi is a full-time public health dentist in a community health

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MATT OISHI, (D’15, GR ’15)  
PUBLIC HEALTH/GENERAL DENTIST, HONOLULU

center, while also working part-time in his family’s general dentistry practice.

It was as a college and graduate student in public policy at Georgetown before entering dental school that he developed an interest in influencing public policy with regard to oral healthcare.

“I knew very little about dental public health, but I knew I wanted to change dental policy,” he says. “I grew up with my dad talking about many of the oral health issues facing Hawaii residents, and going to college in the nation’s capital fueled those interests.”

### “A FOOT IN BOTH DOORS”

When he was accepted to Penn Dental Medicine and learned of the dual-degree MPH program, it was a natural fit.

Through the MPH program, Dr. Oishi recalls that he valued the experience of seeing another side of healthcare. “The faculty in the MPH program were talking about providing care on a population level,” he says. “I felt like I was able to have my foot in both doors — dentistry and public health — and learn how clinical dentistry on an individual level informed population-level interventions and vice versa.”

**EXPLORING GERIATRIC DENTISTRY**

After graduating from Penn Dental Medicine in 2015 and finishing a general practice residency in New Jersey in 2016, Dr. Oishi headed to the University of Iowa for advanced training in public health dentistry, completing a dental public health residency and a geriatric and special needs fellowship. He knew that this combination of training would provide him with the background and skills he would need to treat a wide range of patients in Hawaii.

In Iowa, Dr. Oishi continued the geriatric research he had begun at Penn Dental Medicine for his MPH capstone project, which explored the delivery and financing of dental care among adults at Mercy LIFE, a community senior citizens center at 45th and Chestnut Streets.

“I was fortunate to be able to continue my research with many of the same mentors from Penn Dental and Penn Nursing, including Dr. Robert Collins and Dr. Joan Gluch,” he says. “Both were crucial to my career path.”

**CARING FOR THOSE AT HOME**

After completing his postdoctoral programs in Iowa, Dr. Oishi returned to Hawaii, where he has been sharing his skills and public service passion as a full-time public health dentist. He is part of Kokua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services in Honolulu, a federally qualified health center that serves a local community of low-income Asian and Pacific Islanders, including those from the Philippines, Samoa, Micronesia, and elsewhere. Here, Dr. Oishi works with other dentists to provide clinical dentistry, teach dental residents, and conduct public health needs assessments, program development, and evaluation.

“While the need for treatment is great, there is an even larger need to focus on prevention, oral health literacy, and diet, and nutrition,” he says. “Given the high rate of dental caries and the lack of community water fluoridation, there is a great need for the health center’s long-established school-based sealant program.”

During the pandemic, Dr. Oishi also began working a few days each month on the remote island of Lanai, the smallest inhabited Hawaiian Island, where he is one of a few dentists providing the only oral healthcare at the island’s sole dental practice, Lanai Community Health Center. Boarding a small plane to Lanai reminds him of his experience as an extern working with the Indian Health Service in remote parts of Alaska, one of his most memorable experiences while a dental student.

Providing care to the people of Lanai is a role he cherishes. “It’s great to be welcomed into a small community and to help provide access to care,” he says. “Given the limited access and resources there, it’s also an opportunity to think outside the box about how to deliver dentistry and serve people’s needs.”

Perhaps his most rewarding role, he notes, is practicing alongside his family in Honolulu. Dr. Oishi works part-time in his family’s general dentistry practice with his father, a dentist, and his mother, a hygienist, caring for multiple generations of local families.

“To be able to see the evolution of dental treatment over the years is fascinating, and it is so humbling to serve many patients who began with my grandfather,” he says. “I had fantastic role models at Penn who taught me that in clinical care and public health work, we are serving people’s needs while continually learning from each other. I am fortunate to be able to do that in a public health capacity and in practice with my family.”

**THE NEXT GENERATION**

The following students are currently earning dual DMD and MPH degrees:

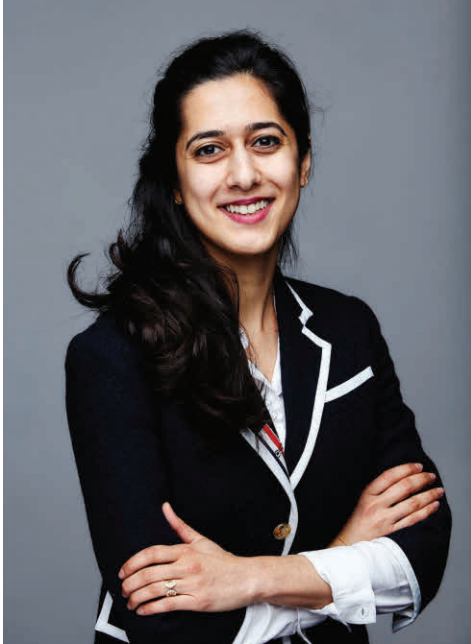
<b>CLASS OF 2022</b>	<b>CLASS OF 2023</b>	<b>CLASS OF 2024</b>
Zaara Baig	Alexis Till	Annie Shtino
Jeremy Budd	Danielle Silver	Neelam Vohra
Kate Trieschman		



“The dual MPH/DMD program offers a rich interdisciplinary curriculum that helps me explore needs of the patients and community. My professors in the MPH love to hear a dental perspective on complex public policy issues.”

— DANIELLE SILVER, D’23





**MARYAM AKBARI (D'14, GR '14)**  
**CLINICAL ATTENDING IN**  
**MAXILLOFACIAL SURGERY,**  
**BRONX, NY**

## SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

When Dr. Maryam Akbari, (D'14, GR '14), first decided on a career in dentistry in college, the Tehran native pictured herself in private practice. "At the time, I felt that running my own business would give me a sense of autonomy, and that dentistry would provide me with an artistic component to my career," she remembers. With her decision to pursue a dual degree in dentistry and public health, her career path has evolved, leading her to a teaching and clinical role at a large urban medical center where opportunities to make a difference abound.

She calls the opportunity to have earned a MPH degree alongside her dental degree "an amazing experience — the best in my career. Learning about public health should be essential for all providers ... I consider myself lucky."

"We have a number of LGBTQ members on our team, and our goal is to build relationships with this group, to let them know that here they will be safe and understood."

— MARYAM AKBARI (D'14, GR '14)

## IDENTIFYING SIGNS OF ABUSE

Dr. Akbari recalls the courses in the MPH program to be robust and serious, and was grateful for the support of her mentor, Susan Sorensen, PhD, Professor of Social Policy. "She was wonderful — very strict, no slacking allowed, and I really appreciated it," she remembers. She worked closely with Dr. Sorenson, who currently serves on the advisory board of the Biden Foundation's Women Against Violence effort, to develop a study on the ways that dental providers respond to signs of domestic violence among patients.

"The signs and symptoms of physical abuse are often visible in the head and neck, so dentists can play an important role in documenting them," she says. Her project involved a survey that assessed the baseline awareness of domestic violence among Penn Dental Medicine faculty and students, as well as their level of comfort in discussing the topic with patients. (A current MPH dual-degree student, Zaara Baig (D'22, GR '22) is continuing this important research in her own capstone project this year.)

## A SAFE, SUPPORTIVE PRACTICE FOR ALL

After graduating with her dual degrees in 2014, Dr. Akbari completed a residency in oral and maxillofacial surgery at Mount Sinai Medical School in New York, which she completed in 2021. In the same year, she accepted her current position as a clinical attending at Lincoln Medical Center in the Bronx. In this role, she is responsible for supervising oral and maxillofacial as well as general dentistry residents. She is in charge of curriculum and leads didactics for oral and maxillofacial

residents, and goes into the operating room once a week for trauma, orthognathic, and related cases.

In addition to her extensive teaching and clinical duties, Dr. Akbari has become interested in a local cause: the plight of transgender youth who may be in the process of transitioning and are without a dental home. Through interactions with her medical colleagues and outreach to local youth centers, she is spreading the word that Lincoln is a supportive place for these young patients to receive dental care.

"Passive and active discrimination against LGBTQ patients in the medical community have left many with a sense of distrust toward healthcare systems and providers," she explains. "We have a number of LGBTQ members on our team, and our goal is to build relationships with this group, to let them know that here they will be safe and understood."

## "A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW"

Dr. Akbari believes the most valuable thing she gained from the MPH program is the ability to look at things from a broader perspective.

"My public health background has always pushed me to be involved with the bigger picture, to take a birds-eye view of things," she says. "What are the problems impacting care, and how can they be solved?"

"But at the end of the day, the most important thing the MPH program taught me was that to solve a community problem, you have to be present in that community, and to know it," she says. "The answer is being there to build sustainable solutions." ■