

Dr. Lynn Tomkins - Women in Dentistry: Work. Life. Balance. With Dr. Lynn Tomkins

Dr. O'Keefe: Today I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Lynn Tomkins who's a member of the Board of the Canadian Dental Association. And Lynn participated recently in a panel discussion at the University of Toronto and I want to find out from her a little bit about that evening, that event, and what were her main takeaways. Lynn, give us a little bit of background about this event and how you got invited?

Dr. Tomkins: Well, I was delighted to be invited by Dr. Effie Habsha, who is the founder of a group called Women in Dentistry and they've been having conversations with women of all ages in dentistry about the things that are particular to women and the challenges they find in practice. So this one was held at the University of Toronto, after clinic on a, I think it was a Tuesday night, and I was one of five members of the panel of varying ages and experiences to answer some of the questions that the students had brought to us. Some of the things that young women dentist, young women dental students, and it was actually open to students of all genders so there were some male students there as well and it was just a really enjoyable hour that we spent and any question could be asked, and I think that the students took away a lot of good information. There was certainly a buzz in the room. There was quite a good turnout. And we had some questions that were given to us ahead of time, so we had a little bit of an idea of what the students wanted to hear about. But there were other questions that came from the floor.

Dr. O'Keefe: Now, I believe that your particular topic area was about the role of women in leadership in organized dentistry. Am I correct with that?

Dr. Tomkins: Absolutely. That is one of the things I talked about and one of the things I wanted to emphasize with the students is that how important it is for young dentists and young women dentists to become involved in their local component societies. They're looking for mentors so that is a great place to find mentors. And if they get involved in their local component society, they become more aware of the issues that affect the profession and probably more interested in what's going on in the wider world of the profession. And from there they can kind of plot out a bit of a career path to go forward in organized dentistry, as far as they would like to go. And I think it's really important for women to be involved. If women aren't part of the discussion, then changes will take place without their input. And it's important for our organizations to reflect our membership. We have a diverse membership and we need that represented at all levels of leadership.

Dr. O'Keefe: Right. Now you and I share one thing in common that we both were involved as student leaders in our own respective national dental student associations. Did

you speak to the students and those present about any challenges that you faced over the years or are just, would you do it all again if you had the opportunity?

Dr. Tomkins: Absolutely, absolutely I would. And any challenges that I faced along the way in retrospect don't seem to be that much of a challenge, actually at the time things can get a little overblown, I think. So, I didn't face any major setbacks or any big challenges during that path. I think I was part of a movement of women coming out of the 70s and the 80s who were very aware that if we didn't get involved that things were going to happen without us having any input into it. So, I think it was part of that movement. I thought you were going to reference our common Irish heritage there for a moment.

Dr. O'Keefe: There are some things best left unmentioned. Lynn, just to wrap up, and I'll bet you were a hit with the audience with the things that you talked about, but from what you heard from the other speakers and the questions in the room what were your, if you like, the impressions that you took away from the others after that evening?

Dr. Tomkins: Well, the other practitioners there, one spoke about working in hospital dentistry, one talked about being a specialist in oral surgery, one was a fairly recent graduate who just bought a practice and one was Dr. Habsha who had organized the event, she's a prosthodontist and a mother of four. And so young women dentists were very interested in knowing how they could combine all of these various career paths or pick one and combine it with a good family life as well. There were questions about, you know, how long do people take for their maternity leaves? How do they manage the kids now? Did they have a practice? Were they associates? At what point would it be a good idea to buy a practice? So, there was a wide-ranging conversation about those issues. And funnily enough, when I applied to dental school, one of the things I was asked, in the late seventies, was if I plan to get married and have a family, and if I was, how did I expect to be a dentist and do all that? And at the time it was sort of a normal question for the time and when I tell people now, they're horrified. But at the same time, those are the things that young people are asking about. How can I have a good work life balance? How can I do it all? And I think the message is you can't do it all at the same time. You have to do it in chunks and pieces, and you have to be a bit elastic in how you organize yourself in your expectations.

Dr. O'Keefe: That's right. Well, you know, I remember once hearing a wise person talk to a group saying that you face many, many challenges and they seem so big, but just break things down into installments and...

Dr. Tomkins: One step at a time, absolutely.

Dr. O'Keefe: One step at a time. Well you know, ...

Dr. Tomkins: And that's what I said about getting involved in organized dentistry, start locally, start small. Build your skillsets, build your knowledge, build your confidence and then as your time permits in your practice or your family, whatever, you can become more involved. And I think we can help; especially young women dentists plot out a career path to leadership. That would be a great thing to do.

Dr. O'Keefe: Well, I can't thank you enough for taking time to speak to us today. I'm certainly looking forward to catching-up with Dr. Habsha to know how she balances all those things that she gets up to as well. And she's going to tell us more about the vision for the Women in Dentistry initiative.

Dr. Tomkins: That's right. Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Dr. O'Keefe: Dr. Lynn Tomkins, thank you so much.

Dr. Tomkins: Thanks.