

Balancing act

Young dentists adjust to demands of family, career

by Keri Kramer

Surprising, perhaps, that the ambassador for a dental office would have such a gummy grin, but Jenna Govoni charms patients and staff alike at Brushin' on Belmont, a pediatric and general dentistry practice on Chicago's northwest side.

Jenna's parents, Drs. Robert and Monika Govoni, occasionally bring the 9-month-old tot with them on Saturdays when they both work half-days.

"Jenna is really welcomed by the staff and patients," said Dr. Robert Govoni. "She brings a bit of fun into the office."

With Jenna's arrival last summer, the Govonis juggled their schedules: Dr. Monika Govoni cut her hours at the practice she shares with her husband, while he continues to work as an associate in another practice. They both rely on family, babysitters and occasionally a staff member to watch Jenna while they work. Dr. Robert Govoni says he and his wife are "completely satisfied" with the system.

In a survey of 41 new dentists conducted by the Chicago Dental Society earlier this year, 36 percent of respondents emphasized the importance of flexible work arrangements like the Govonis' as not only the best way to balance the demands of family and work but also a significant attraction to the dental profession.

Sixty-one percent of those surveyed were parents; 27 percent were the primary caregiver for their children; and an additional 12 percent cared for another family member, such as a parent.

"Flexibility was definitely a deciding factor in why I pursued a career in dentistry," said Dr. Susana Torres, a community health dentist in Chicago and a single mother to two young boys. "I



Photography by John McNulty

Dr. Susana Torres works to balance the responsibilities of being a community health dentist in Chicago and a single mother to two young boys.

found the lifestyle much more in line with my needs than if I entered medical school."

Dr. Torres, who works full-time for the Chicago Public Schools during the school year and reduced hours at Chic-

ago-area clinics during the summer, relies on a full-time nanny to care for her children during working hours. "She's a godsend," said Dr. Torres.

With evenings reserved to spend time with her sons, Dr. Torres has been

stymied in attending professional networking events or CDS branch meetings, which are held at night. “I was frustrated at first,” she said. “But you have to have realistic expectations about what you can accomplish in a day. Moderation is key.”

Dr. Alice Boghosian, a general dentist in Niles and mother to 17-year-old Lydia Gerlach, agreed. “A friend of mine has a saying: ‘We as women can have everything, just not all at once,’” she said.

Dr. Boghosian worked as an associate up until the time of Lydia’s birth. “The commute was long, and I didn’t want to work for someone else,” she said. So when Lydia was a couple months old, Dr. Boghosian began looking to rent space in an office closer to home.

With college on the horizon for Lydia, Dr. Boghosian reflected on the challenges of parenting and working. “I can’t think of anything I have done that has been more rewarding than motherhood,” she said. “But professional fulfillment is part of the equation, too. I couldn’t do either full-time.”

It’s a sentiment shared by several new mothers who responded to the CDS survey. “Family and professional needs are in constant flux, and it should be our goal to try and maintain a balance between the two,” wrote Dr. Stephanie Liss, a dentist on Chicago’s South Side.

“The balance my first year in practice was terrible,” wrote Dr. Kimberly Sheppard, a periodontist practicing in the northwest suburbs. “I was primarily at



Nine-month-old Jenna Govoni charms staff and patients alike when her parents, Drs. Robert and Monika Govoni bring her to the office on Saturdays when they work half-days.

Her search led her to fellow dental school alum Dr. John Hagopian. Initially, she worked part-time while her mother took care of her daughter. Over time, though, her patient load grew and she and Dr. Hagopian became partners.

Dr. Boghosian’s choice to cut her work schedule to part-time resonated with survey respondents: 50 percent said that they had cut hours to care for children or another family member, and 67 percent said that they were “very” or “completely satisfied” with their choice.

the office while my two infants were cared for by a live-in nanny. It felt unsettling and unbalanced, which made my time at the office more difficult.” Having cut back on her hours and with her children in preschool, Dr. Sheppard now says she is “very satisfied” with her work arrangement.

In 2003, the American Dental Association surveyed dentists who had children, asking them about the amount of time taken off from work due to the birth of a child. Not unexpectedly,



Original artwork by Joanna Brown

Been there, done that

Dentists responding to the survey on work-life balance offer their advice.

- **In stressful times, take a long view.** “Think about what is important now, but also what will be important to you and your family in five or 10 years,” wrote one dentist.

- **Run an efficient office.** “Streamline routines in the office, like clinical notes, so that they can be dictated to an assistant,” suggested one CDS member. Limiting lunch breaks and working longer but fewer days are other ideas.

- **Find a caregiver you can trust.** While many respondents do rely on family and friends to provide care, CDS members commented several times on the importance of good childcare. “If you can’t trust the person caring for your children, you won’t be able to concentrate at work,” said one member.

- **Always have a back-up plan.** What happens when your sitter is sick or your spouse is out of town? Planning for worst-case scenarios can help reduce the stress of dealing with emergencies.

- **Make your spouse a partner in childcare.** Communication, said several respondents, is key. “Ask what his/her expectations are for his/her profession. Be willing to make compromises. Dentistry is a wonderful profession that allows you to adjust your hours of practice yet still have a financially viable situation,” one dentist wrote.

female dentists were more likely than male dentists to take time off before and after the birth, and to take more time off.

What was surprising in the ADA survey, though, was the increasing role that younger male dentists had in caring for their infant children: Male dentists under 40 took more time off from work on average than male dentists over 40.

In CDS's own survey, 34 percent of respondents were fathers, and many commented on the need for open communication between spouses on sharing the load.

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Dr. Adrian Codel, a general dentist who practices in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood and a father to two young boys, said he has reduced his work week to 32 hours and works evenings and weekends so that the family's reliance on outside care is minimal. "We have a babysitter about 12 hours a week to watch our older son," he said. "We don't plan on getting a full-time nanny."

To make sure both parents are on the same page, he and his wife, Liz Kooy, use Google's calendar program to remind each other of appointments. "We have our work schedules down to a science," Dr. Codel said. His wife, who works full-time as a social worker from their home, cares for their sons on days when he sees patients.

He also spends one day a week taking his sons on "little adventures," such as trips to the zoo or a museum. It's a practice he heartily suggests to other dentists: "I recommend dentists work out an agreement with their employer or alter their schedule so that they can spend time with their family during the day. Give the spouse or caregiver a break and do your kids a favor by spending time with them.

"I've joked to my wife—if we win the lottery tomorrow, I'd be happy to be a stay-at-home dad," he said. ■

Keri Kramer is director of communications for the Chicago Dental Society.



TOP: Lakeview dentist Adrian Codel has reduced his work load and works nights and weekends to minimize the family's reliance on outside care. Using Google's calendar feature, Dr. Codel and his wife, Liz Kooy, have the coordination of their schedules down to a science.



LEFT: General dentist Alice Boghosian found a practice closer to her home in Niles when her daughter was born.