

Dr. Keith Da Silva – Explore Your Career Options

Dr. Da Silva: My name is Keith Da Silva. I am a dual specialist in Dental Public Health and Pediatric Dentistry. And I'll be speaking a bit more about my journey into dental public health, which I completed at the University of Toronto in terms of my master's training program. I finished that in 2018.

Dr. Da Silva: So again, my journey into dental public health has been a long one. I started in private practice as a pediatric dentist and, you know, through my activities working with individual patients as well as volunteering with organized dental associations, I started to realize that as much as I love treating my individual patients that the problems that children were facing in terms of early childhood caries as well as their overall access to care was bigger than what I could solve just in my own office. And so, I started first getting involved with more volunteer work and then I realized that this was something that I could use my skills towards. And, I had met some few people who were working in public health units, both as dental public health professionals as well as broader health care, public health workers and gained an interest in it and saw that I did have potentially the skills to make a difference in this avenue but really needed to learn more and to gain the tools in order to do that. And so, I went and pursued that training and it's kind of brought me where I am today.

Dr. Da Silva: And so, as a dental public health specialist, I'm currently working in an academic institution, although it still may not be the typical teaching and research role that you may think. So, I'll talk a little bit about the typical day of a specialist, and I'll start by saying: one there is no typical day, but I'll try to give you a sense of all the tasks that may come on to my desk and my role. So, for starters, I'm in charge or I kind of direct our community outreach programs and our community outreach clinic. So, this includes engaging with the community as well as just running the program. So, working with the government in terms of the publicly insured programs, dealing with community-based interventions and trying to develop culturally sensitive care for our local community.

Dr. Da Silva: I'm also involved in teaching and that includes classroom teaching. So, mentoring the next generation of dental students, not necessarily to become dental public health professionals, but to develop a social conscience in their own private practice and maybe one day then they can go through a similar journey as I did through practice. So, I teach in the classroom I teach in the pre-clinic, I still haven't forgotten my pediatric dental skills. And so I also teach a little bit in pediatrics in the clinic as well. And so, it's kind of that focus of community-based work that I try to instill in my students. I'm also heavily engaged in research, so this is population-based and policy-based work that I do. And a lot of this really involves kind of a new approach to research in terms of community-based research. So really engaging community members; I've been getting them involved in the whole research process.

Dr. Da Silva: So, it changes the kind of paradigm we have in public health where professionals tell people or study people and tell them what they need to know. Rather we include them in the process and try to give back to them in a way more than just your typical publication but actually implementing change. And so that's kind of the focus of my area related to access to care. Current task that I'm doing and although it changes every week, but right now I am working on the community dental day that we're doing in the next month. So, we're going to be going out to the community myself as well as some dental students and offering some basic health promotion, oral hygiene, and giving out some goodies as well as just interacting with the community. And so, I think that'll be good for dental students to be able to see the difference they can make as future health care professionals. And then also I'm involved in kind of revising the infection control guidelines for the dental school as well as our clinics. So, it's really a bit of everything that we do in dental public health that we often overlook.

Dr. Da Silva: In terms of what I like being best about a specialist, there are many answers, but the broad one is that you're constantly being challenged. There really is no answers in many of the cases and you're constantly redefining. Essentially, we are half specialists rewriting the textbooks that are out there. We're kind of at a different level in terms of the problems we face and whether it's in public health or any clinical specialty. And that we often have to look out and search for new information that sometimes we generated ourselves. And so that's really what led me not just to public health, but to the academic side of things. One of our kind of core areas in dental public health is evidence-based dentistry. And so not just teaching practitioners how to incorporate it into their practice, but we're also helping kind of redefine the research that needs to be done in terms of improving the profession and improving patient outcomes.

Dr. Da Silva: And so that's a constant challenge and it's really rewarding that we are part of redefining not just dental public health, but all the specialties in terms of this research process. And so, I really do love the overall challenge that it faces and you're constantly thinking for new ideas and changing the paradigm of how healthcare is being delivered. And then, the other thing I find in a role as a dental public health specialist is really the interprofessional and collaboration that we have with other, not just health units or health disciplines, but even now I'm starting to work with those in public policy here in Saskatchewan. We work heavily with those in agriculture research and engineering, and we even have some projects with the veterinary school. And so, you're really starting to bring oral health care into the broader context, which I think is something we really need to do forward in terms of where we need to go in the future. So, it's nice to be a part of that and kind of see things moving in that direction.

Dr. Da Silva: In terms of advice I can give you in choosing a specialty program, whether it be dental public health or any specialty. The first thing I would say is to really

gather as much information as you can and so you want to immerse yourself into the specialty. So shadow practitioners in the field, read journals related to the clinical and the dental public health specialty, and really just talk to as many professionals about their experiences and their daily lives, because even within each specialty, and especially in dental public health, there are many different options of what you can do with your career. In dental public health, there's an academic route, you can work for the government, whether it's local, public health units, provincial or federal agencies. You can work with dental associations or be consultants with areas private or non-profit organizations, and you could have the role of a researcher, an analyst, or a program planner and evaluator. So there's many options that a few years ago I didn't even know existed. And so you really want to kind of get an idea of what's out there and see kind of what you like to do and what you don't like to do, what your skill sets are, and how they have that specialty might fit to you.

Dr. Da Silva:

Second thing I would recommend is to try as a dental student to be as well rounded as you can. Obviously to get into a specialty program, it's competitive, so your grades need to be at a certain level, but you also don't want to overlook other aspects of just building yourself as a professional. So this includes volunteerism, leadership, getting involved in some research also helps, but showing that you can excel at multiple different aspects and that you're a well rounded person because ultimately you are going to be entering a profession and you will be a professional that's kind of held to a standard in the community. And so, the more of these attributes you show, the better prepared you'll be for handling a specialty program.

Dr. Da Silva:

And the last thing I would say is keep an open mind. I know many dental students come into dental school with a preconception of what they want to do, whether it's being in a general dental office or a specific specialty, but you really want to explore each option firsthand and see what's best for you. Myself, having been through two specialties now, and I still do practice both, I can tell you when I was in dental school, I never thought I would have been first a pediatric dentist and then a dental public health specialist down the road. So the options are limitless, but you want to keep an open mind when evaluating them.