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Through creativity and perseverance, board-certified periodontist **Dr. Hanh Bui Keating** has safely and effectively treated patients during the gravest health crisis in more than a century.

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The Next RIGHT THING

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Through creativity and perseverance, board-certified periodontist Dr. Hanh Bui Keating has safely and effectively treated patients during the gravest health crisis in more than a century.

Hanh Bui Keating, D.M.D., woke up one morning in December 2019 to find all her professional degrees neatly framed—a Christmas gift from her husband. For years, she had kept those degrees in a box, realizing that the knowledge she had earned traveled with her, but the pleasant surprise convinced her to give proper attention to the degrees she had worked so hard to attain. She promptly had them professionally arranged and hung in a prominent place.

Then COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill. Dr. Keating, who is a board-certified periodontist with Bryn Mawr Periodontal Associates, can remember staring at the wall of framed degrees in the days following the shutdown and doing a lot of “soul searching.” The weeks that followed were especially challenging for members of the dental community. After all, dental professionals would have to perform incredibly delicate procedures on un-masked patients, thereby putting themselves at greater risk of airborne transmission. Practices also had to follow a stringent set of regulations just to see emergency patients.

For some, the barriers to reopen were just too great. “I can remember looking at that wall of my degrees, which showed my whole path starting from my youth, and asking, ‘Do I keep going?’” Dr. Keating recalls. “It was an overwhelming time, and all of the things that we had to do to be able to open again felt like an impossible road to travel. With my husband by my side, I said, ‘I’ll just have to do the next right thing.’”

And that’s exactly what she did.





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We were able to pivot through some of the difficult times and still take great care of our patients. I'm so proud of what we achieved as a team.

—DR. HANH BUI KEATING,
BRYN MAWR PERIODONTAL
ASSOCIATES

She began exploring the process of reopening as a “one step at a time” endeavor—and she threw herself into it. First, she researched the equipment she could add to the practice to mitigate the spread of the disease. Then, she procured personal protective equipment for her and her staff, which proved particularly challenging considering the widespread PPE shortages. She remembers waking up at 6 a.m. one day and going to six different Home Depot locations in search of N95 masks. She succeeded in procuring what she needed, and wound up donating excess PPE to medical colleagues.

Despite having almost no income from

her periodontal practice, Dr. Keating decided to invest in increasingly expensive equipment and technology. “Even if we only cared for a few emergency patients here and there, it was the right thing to do to protect our team, our patients, and our community,” she says. The cost of gloves alone had gone up 50 times, she remembers, and frustrations mounted as guidelines from resources such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continually changed.

Dr. Keating kept pressing forward, driven by her commitment to keep doing “the next right thing.” She read every article she could find and adapted as the science evolved. An article about protocols on an airline using electrostatic sprayers to disinfect fine particles convinced her to look for something similar for her office—no small feat when such equipment was nearly impossible to get.

Dr. Keating succeeded in reopening the practice in May 2020. Equipped with a HEPA air filtration system and UV lights for enhanced sterilization, Dr. Keating was able to create a “surgically clean air” environment.

The question remained: How would patients respond to this new environment, which became cold and “sterile” compared with pre-pandemic days? She used to greet some patients with a hug, and now she had to speak to them through layers of protective gear that made her feel like a character from *Star Wars*. To her surprise, most patients were thrilled just to be back in her care, benefiting from the personalized, gentle treatment to ensure their oral health. Many of the most vulnerable patients made their first trip outside the house a dental visit with her.

“Serving others is what I love to do—it’s what I find so rewarding about this career,” she says. “There were so many cases of dental pain and infection, cracked teeth, patients who could not wait any longer to

be seen at the detriment of their overall health. It’s so important to me that I make patients feel comfortable and less anxious. I could tell patients knew we were doing everything we could to protect them when they thanked us for their care, for being available, despite having to undergo surgeries in the middle of a pandemic.”

Dr. Keating says she and her team, as well as her patients, have also found time to laugh and to be grateful, too. She can remember “feeling like it was Christmas morning” when that first order of N95 masks came in. The celebratory scene in her mind would be akin to *The Wolf of Wall Street*’s Jordan Belfort tossing money in the air, she jokes, except it was PPE rather than dollar bills.

Dr. Keating marvels at how well her team has adapted, including the implementation of new routines and adopting new steps to protect patients and each other. “I am incredibly lucky to have the team believe in me,” she says. “All of the doctors and supportive staff saw how hard I worked to keep them protected, so they decided to trust my vision.”

Through it all, Dr. Keating says the practice did not have a single outbreak. This is likely due in part to the fact that all staff got vaccinated as soon as they could, as did she. Furthermore, Dr. Keating ensures the ongoing safety of others by receiving a new COVID test every 10 to 14 days.

In the end, Dr. Keating says her team’s creativity and perseverance have paid off. Though she admits to having gone through a moment of uncertainty at the outset—of “deciding whether or not to keep going”—she says she could not be more thankful that she did.

“Thinking back to looking at those degrees on my wall, I had to make some tough choices, and it wasn’t easy,” she says. “But we were able to pivot through some of the difficult times and still take great care of our patients. I’m so proud of what we achieved as a team. Today, we continue to move the bar up and work harder each day.” ■