



## dental winner Karolin Bilal

**Title:** Dental director  
**Organization:** Gompers Dental Center  
**Education:** High school  
**Professional designations:** Certified Dental Assistant  
**Years in the industry:** 6  
**Hometown:** Regensburg, Germany  
**Residence:** Laveen  
**Family:** Husband and two children  
**Pets:** Dog  
**First job:** McDonald's  
**Volunteer activities:** Maricopa County Oral Health Leadership, Advocates and Resources (MOLAR), Red Cross, PTA  
**Why you chose health care:** My two uncles were dentists, and I was always interested in the field. When my husband was in the military, I had a chance to receive free training as a dental assistant. It was the perfect opportunity.  
**Favorite way to unwind:** Reading books and spending time with my family  
**Favorite website:** Arizona Dental Association, [www.azdda.org](http://www.azdda.org)  
**Greatest strength:** Caring about people's needs  
**Greatest weakness:** Being a perfectionist  
**One quality you believe a health care hero possesses:** A health care hero needs to care.

# Dental health field braces for brave new normal

BY MIKE SUNNUCKS  
Phoenix Business Journal

**F**or businesses of all kinds, the new normal pits the cost of technological advances against the challenges of the recession's hangover: The dental field is no exception as practitioners, community health providers and their patients continue to face economy-induced obstacles.

"There are several big challenges facing the dental field. First and foremost is the economy," said Dr. Jeffrey Greene, a Fountain Hills dentist and a professor at A.T. Still University's Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health. "This impacts all practices and affects the hiring of auxiliary dental staff or associate dentists, purchasing of dental equipment and supplies, and investing in new technologies."

Greene also notes that the recession and its lingering damage have resulted in patients losing coverage because of layoffs, or having benefits reduced as employers cut costs.

The impact also is felt by nonprofit and community dental providers, whose services are paid for via charitable donations or government programs.

"As a result of our current economic conditions, our state government has chosen to significantly reduce funding for those with disabilities. Since many of our patients live at or below the poverty level, without financial support, their dental needs go unmet," said Karolin Bilal, dental director of Gompers Dental Center.

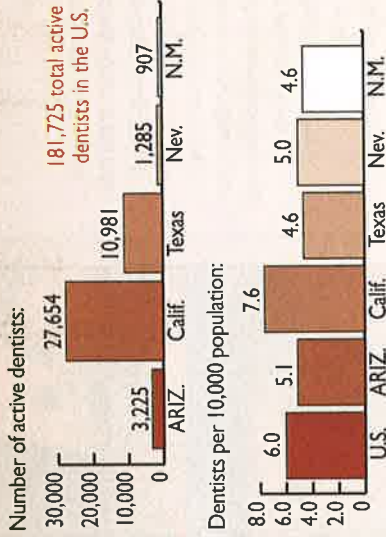
The west Phoenix facility provides dental services to people with developmental disabilities, many of whom are uninsured or on Medicaid.

"Our first challenge is in educating parents and caregivers of individuals with disabilities on the importance of dental care toward a patient's overall health," Bilal said. "Many have never had preventive care, so their dental needs can be significant."

"In addition, many individuals with disabilities are uninsured or underinsured, so taking someone through a complete treatment plan can be a long process and present steep financial challenges," she said.

Elizabeth Yi, co-founder of the Community Dental Foundation Inc. in Phoenix, said she worries that state Medicaid cuts increased the number of uninsured in Arizona and cut access to medical and dental care.

## FACTS & STATS



Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control; Health, United States Report, 2010

The Arizona Health Care Containment System, the state's Medicaid program, covers 1.37 million indigent patients. An additional 1.27 million Arizonans are uninsured, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. That means 20 percent of the state's residents lack health care and 21 percent are on AHCCCS.

The recession and slow rebound have changed the way employers approach benefits, resulting in a shifting landscape for dentists and other medical providers, said Sandi Perez, vice president of communications and community benefit for Delta Dental of Arizona.

"The downturn in the economy has impacted the way companies and benefits managers research and purchase their insurance products. For many, the sole focus is the cost and not the breadth and depth of the benefits," Perez said. "Local service and large contracted networks of providers are important, but not as critical as they were four years ago."

Perez also said federal health care reforms pushed through Congress by President Barack Obama in 2010 change the landscape for patients, providers and employers. She said legal challenges to those health reforms create uncertainty, but she's also concerned dental coverage will get lost in the mix

as insurance plans — and how they are provided — might be retooled. "Health care reform is the looming challenge for companies in the health care field," Perez said. "The uncertainties about the status of the law, given the legal challenges and lawsuits, place these reforms in limbo, but we must position our companies to be ready to directly serve health care consumers by 2014."

"A shift away from company-based benefits would have a profound impact on the insurance industry — specifically for dental benefits, as often dental coverage is seen as less important than other medical services," she said.

Greene and others said those graduating from dental and hygienist schools face plenty of student loan debt, which stays with them for a while. This impacts their ability to start their own practices, buy equipment and get additional training.

And with dental equipment becoming ever more advanced, this becomes a greater hardship.

Bilal said the biggest change she's seeing is patient insurance cards that can be read by computer scanners.

"They can read and enter all of the patient's insurance information, along with important treatment details," she said.

Yi said the Community Foundation provides dental services in mobile labs, so continued advances in wireless technology help its operations.

Greene said he's seeing widespread acceptance of new high-tech tools used on patients. He said such advances could change how dental practices are formed.

"The growing acceptance and usage of digital radiography and electric hand pieces is seeing growth. This change is also influenced by the newer dental schools incorporating this in the teaching curriculum," he said.

"The costs are high, so the individual practitioner needs a growing practice to want to invest in these technologies," he added. "Group practices can more easily purchase this technology. This may ultimately lead to changes in the manner in which dentists practice, where more newer graduates may seek out or form group practices."

Connect with **Mike Sunnucks** at [msunnucks@bizjournals.com](mailto:msunnucks@bizjournals.com) or on Twitter at [@mikesunx](https://twitter.com/mikesunx).



Greene