



CADAT / CDAA Joint Annual Conference April 10 – 11, 2026



Heather Lawler, RDH, MSDH

hlawler@pacific.edu

Course: *Strategies for Oral Health Literate Communication*

Course Description:

This training for dental assistants will highlight the key factors that influence and promote oral health literacy (OHL) in dental practices, as well as how to access the CA OHL Toolkit and implement its tools and strategies in practice. We will also cover the use of the teach-back technique with patients and how to use the OHL Toolkit to practice teach-back skills using patient vignettes from the OHL Toolkit. We will also share the experiences of professionals who have implemented teach-back and other OHL strategies. Additionally, there will be time for discussion on strategies to improve patient communication.

OHL refers to the patient's ability to understand and act on oral health information, as well as the provider's ability to communicate this information effectively. OHL is a key strategy to improve health equity, dental care practices, and patient-provider communication.

Advancing OHL is a key goal of the CA Department of Public Health, Office of Oral Health (CDPH OOH), the CA Dental Assistants Association, the American Dental Association, and many dental professional organizations. Over 20 years of OHL research and practice have identified evidence-based communication techniques and other approaches that can be used with patients in dental practice settings. However, most dental professionals have not had OHL training either in their professional or continuing education experiences, and there are few supportive resources available for them to learn about OHL or teach-back.

During the past four years, the CDPH OOH and the UC Berkeley Health Research for Action (HRA) center, in partnership with state and national dental professionals, have developed trainings and the CA OHL Toolkit to support dental professionals and their teams. The Toolkit is a free, easy-to-use, digital resource for oral health providers to learn about OHL and how to implement evidence-based practices, including teach back, in their dental practices.



CADAT / CDAA Joint Annual Conference April 10 – 11, 2026



Course Objectives:

1. Describe the concept of OHL and its importance in improving communication with patients, patient care, and health equity.
2. Explain how teach-back enhances patient understanding and engagement in their oral health.
3. Discuss how to apply the teach-back technique with patients to improve their understanding of oral health information.
4. Learn how to access and use the California OHL Toolkit.

Speaker Bio

Heather is a dedicated dental hygiene professional with over 20 years of experience in private practice, now serving as a dental hygiene educator at the University of the Pacific, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry. She holds a Master of Science in Dental Hygiene from the University of Michigan, as well as degrees in Linguistics and Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley.

Passionate about community service and public health, Heather serves as the Northern California representative for the Dental Hygiene Liaison Project, providing oral health education to Head Start programs. She recently led a transprofessional initiative to improve oral and general health for individuals with diabetes and prediabetes through the Santa Cruz Oral Health Access Steering Committee. Additionally, she has collaborated with a community health worker program in Watsonville, delivering oral health education and access resources to CHWs working in underserved communities.

Her work reflects a commitment to oral health advocacy, education, and interdisciplinary collaboration, ensuring better health outcomes for diverse populations.