

Testimony of Ellen Eisenberg, D.M.D.
Professor and Section Chair, Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology
Division of Oral & Maxillofacial Diagnostic Sciences
Department of Oral Health and Diagnostic Sciences
UConn School of Dental Medicine
Associate Professor, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine
UConn School of Medicine
UConn Health, Farmington, Connecticut

Appropriations Committee Hearing
February 2021

My name is Ellen Eisenberg. I am a UConn Health faculty and a resident of West Hartford, Connecticut, a town that I love. My State Representative is Kate Farrar; my State Senator is Derek Slap. I want to thank all of you on the committee for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to share my views. I want you to know that I am grateful for the General Assembly's past support of UConn Health, and that I strongly believe that there is a definite need for that support to be continued.

I arrived in Connecticut over 40 years ago to assume my position as a full time faculty member of the UConn Schools of Dental Medicine and Medicine. At that time, I had completed my residency in Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology at Harvard, and had stayed on there for a couple of years to teach and to practice. I found my position there to be marginally satisfying because the environment was restrictive. Then, one day in early Spring of my second year on the Harvard faculty, I was invited to consider applying for an open oral pathology faculty position in UConn's then Department of Oral Diagnosis. I was intrigued—I had heard good things about this young school—and I decided to visit the Health Center campus. That visit did it for me! I agreed to apply for the position, scheduled an interview and gave a seminar to the departmental faculty. I sensed a genuine vibrancy and warmth at UConn that resonated with me. Right away, it was clear to me that UConn was expansive—it felt all about opportunity and growth. I knew deep down that it was where I wanted to invest my time and energy, develop my ability as a teacher and as a practicing diagnostician, and provide my professional services to the State of Connecticut and its residents. Since then, I have neither looked back, nor experienced a moment of disappointment about my decision to come here. I have much to be grateful for, and being part of the UConn Health family is truly at the top of the list.

Oral and maxillofacial pathology is a diagnostic specialty of Dental Medicine. It is important for you to know that UConn Health is home to two of only three oral and maxillofacial pathologists in the entire State. The two of us here at UConn are extremely proud to serve the outstanding students and residents we teach and the patients for whom we care. We are delighted to be in communication with the dentists and physicians all around the State of Connecticut and beyond who send their patients' biopsy specimens to our laboratory; and we appreciate the relationships we have nurtured with the many healthcare providers who refer their patients to us and entrust us with their care. Throughout the year we also receive requests for our opinions on cases sent to us by pathologists at hospitals around the State and outside of Connecticut.

My days at UConn Health are full and very satisfying. I direct and co-direct several courses in the School of Dental Medicine. I teach several courses in all four years of the predoctoral Oral Diagnosis and Clinical Medicine curriculum, both in classrooms and in the clinics. I also teach dental residents, and residents in selected specialties of medicine. In addition, during the first two years of both the Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine's MDelta curriculum, I teach predoctoral dental and medical students engaged together in team-based, flipped classroom learning. I am impressed with the overall brilliance, integrity and professional commitment of the students we accept into our medical, dental and graduate programs at UConn Health.

I am the director of UConn's Oral Pathology Biopsy service, the only one of its kind in the state of Connecticut. Our service has an excellent reputation, and our staff is totally dedicated to serving our contributors. Between myself and my faculty colleague, in an average year we see and report on the roughly 4000 tissue specimens we receive annually. My colleague and I also see patients referred to us for clinical oral pathology consultations from extramural

practitioners of dentistry and medicine in Connecticut and beyond its borders. Dental students and occasionally dental residents are regularly scheduled to accompany us in our clinical consultation sessions as part of their education in diagnosis. Thus, the oral biopsy service and the clinical diagnostic practice are both modest revenue generators and key teaching forums.

Last March, when COVID became a reality here and daily activities as we knew them at UConn Health came to a grinding halt, we, as educators recognized that even though our clinics were shuttered (save for emergency care), our didactic curriculum had to continue without missing a beat. With neither students nor faculty permitted to be physically present in the classrooms, we all had to take a crash course in using on-line technology for teaching and learning. I quickly learned to deliver the courses that I co-direct and others that I contribute to, virtually. I can foresee the virtual classroom continuing to have a permanent place, in part or in whole, in many courses as the future unfolds.

The faculty and Deans who planned and prepared all of us for returning to clinical activities, also worked tirelessly for months to ensure we had an adequate supply of PPE and that conditions in our clinics would be safe for care providers at all levels, the clinic support staff, and all of our patients. The period of preparation for and the launch of resumption of clinical care was a monumental undertaking; those who led the charge are also truly heroes of the COVID era.

I would certainly be remiss, were I to neglect to call out the predoctoral students who volunteered in the hospital during the peak of the Spring 2020 shutdown, assisting staff in the ICU caring for COVID patients. These student volunteers put themselves at great risk during a most fraught time. They, too, are heroes of the COVID era and I am tremendously proud of them for their selflessness and compassion.

From the beginning of their first predoctoral year, our UConn Health dental and medical students contribute their time and talent regularly on a volunteer basis in communities all over Connecticut, urban and rural, providing access to care for the homeless, for migrant workers and for those who are generally underserved. At our dental clinics here in Farmington, we provide care for the greatest number of Connecticut citizens on Medicaid and Husky, who would otherwise be denied care elsewhere.

I therefore believe that it is most appropriate and truly essential for the State of Connecticut to continue to invest in UConn Health. We have always stepped up, collectively, in both good times and challenging times. We have encouraged students to become involved in research; we have endeavored to maintain highest quality standards of education and professional training for our students, Connecticut's future healthcare providers, and we have striven to offer a robust menu of cutting-edge contemporary dental and medical services to the people of this State.

Thank you for your consideration.