

Welcome friends and colleagues to another issue of the *International Journal of Dental Hygiene*. Once again our editorial team have presented us with a variety of topical articles, which are relevant to our professional practice.

Treatment of patients with special needs is an important aspect of dental hygiene practice and the article which reports the findings of a study on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of dental undergraduates in the management of the oral health needs of people with HIV/AIDS provides us with relevant data that can be applied to undergraduate training as well as clinical practice.

Dental caries, although preventable, continues to be prevalent in the global community. Studies such as the one conducted among elementary school children in North Korea, which assessed the prevalence of dental caries among this group of children, are vital to the successful treatment of this common dental disease. Results of such studies assist oral health professionals and public health agencies to plan and implement caries prevention strategies on either an individual or community scale.

In order for dental hygienists to motivate patients to change their oral habits and assume responsibility for their oral health they must first understand and appreciate their patients beliefs and behaviours in relation to oral health care. Studies such as the one conducted among Jordanian adults is one such example in which research can assist the dental hygienist to develop a deeper appreciation of their patients' beliefs and translate this knowledge into clinical practice.

In light of my previous comments I was particularly interested to read the study on research utilization among Swedish dental hygienists and the subsequent impact on attitudes, workplace practices and patient outcomes. Evidence-based practice was reviewed in random samples of dental hygienists who had completed 1- and 2-year education programmes. It was concluded that the length of education is a key factor influencing the application of research findings to practice.

In response to the changing oral health needs of the community the role of the dental hygienist has expanded which

has resulted in changes to the education of dental hygienists, expansion of curriculum and the introduction of new teaching methodologies. Globally we see a shift in the length of education programmes from 2 years to 3 and 4 years and a shift in education institutions from community colleges to universities. It is rare to find a dental hygiene education programme of less than 2 years today.

As with other health professionals it is essential that dental hygienists utilize research findings to improve their clinical practice and optimize the treatment outcomes for their patients. This evidence-based approach to practice has become increasingly important in the clinical practice of dental hygiene and is now an essential aspect of the teaching philosophy of more and more education institutions.

Research utilization is now an integral part of dental hygiene education and undergraduates are expected to research scientific articles, critically appraise this research and where appropriate implement in clinical practice. Students are taught how to use a library, databases and Internet and receive basic research training.

As a consequence, graduates are empowered to continue their professional development throughout their professional lives. They have the skills and attitudes to independently research, evaluate and implement research findings and to seek further knowledge through continuing education courses and study groups.

Dental hygienists, as healthcare professionals, provide comprehensive oral health care services to individuals and communities through both private and public instrumentalities. It is vital to positive patient outcomes that we, as individuals, continue to strive for high standards of care by taking responsibility for our professional development. Many opportunities are available through our professional associations and I encourage you to be committed to your own professional development.

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