

It is a great honour to have been nominated President of the International Federation of Dental Hygienists and I feel privileged that I have been given this opportunity.

I would like to thank you for the confidence you have in me and I will do my utmost to do what is necessary to help to unite dental hygienists from all over the world in the common cause of promoting dental health.

Dental hygiene is an international profession. This fact was brought home to me again as a chair of the Sunstar award when I received over 50 applications for the three categories: students, project and research, from more than 10 countries. It was truly impressive to see what dental hygienists do worldwide and appreciate how motivated they are in promoting dental hygiene, and how creative and concerned they are for their patients. It empowered me to address you about a topic which is close to my heart.

We have to ask ourselves if oral health is important to an individual's overall health. Does oral health promote the quality of life? Does everyone have the right to oral health care? We, as dental hygienists, know that oral health is important to an individual's health. Many publications prove the point and it is the human right to have access to care, including oral health care. We must identify which groups in society do not have access to oral health care, and ask ourselves whether we are willing to be socially responsible?

Social responsibility is taking the initiative to be involved in causes that you believe in and showing a willingness to give time and expertise to make a better world. How can we as dental hygienists contribute to increasing accessibility for those groups which do not have access to care?

I sincerely believe that we as a profession can make a difference to the quality of life of people and what I would really like is if each of us can reach out to people who do not get the dental hygiene care they need. This can be done as an individual, as a group, as a dental hygiene school or as an association. This can be done in your home town, in your province or state, in your country but also abroad.

Working as an individual is like a stone thrown into a pond. It might seem that the effect is slight, but never forget the circle which extends around the spot where the stone entered the water which has a continuous effect, however small it might seem in the beginning.

My brother once told me a story which made a big impression on me and which I want to share with you. Imagine a

beach after a storm. There are debris everywhere, but what you see most are a very large number of sea stars which lie on the sand, far from the water. A young boy, 10 years or so, is throwing sea stars into the sea. A man approaches him and asks him why he is doing this. He says that if the sea stars do not get to the water they will die. The man answers that there are so many sea stars lying around that he will never manage this and why bother at all? The boy acknowledges that he cannot throw all the sea stars back into the water and thus cannot save them all, but waving with the sea star he has in his hand he says: 'it matters for this one'.

We can also have an impact if we as dental hygienists become advocates in society. An advocate focuses on a systematic approach to creating change by:

- promoting the need for innovation and change in health care;
- working with agencies, organizations and social institutions;
- promoting the public's well-being and attainment of dental hygiene's oral health goals for society.

Advocacy can involve:

- creating a new policy;
- changing existing policies;
- changing the implementation of existing policies.

You cannot do this alone, for the simple fact that so much work is involved and thus it is nearly impossible to do so. You have to gather and disseminate information and you need to research and use information from various sources. These can be networks, alliances and coalitions.

Let me give you some examples.

1. The Irish dental hygiene association helped to set up a primary dental care unit in Uganda and one of their members volunteered with a dental team to set it up.
2. In Korea, the Public Service Committee in the dental hygienist association participated in giving dental health services for those in vulnerable classes like the handicapped, the elderly and children. The dental hygienist association supports this type of action by providing cars with equipment, oral health care and education.
3. In Switzerland, a national campaign was organized for better oral hygiene in collaboration with nursery schools and primary schools.
4. In Australia, dental hygienists have membership of the National Health Alliance to lobby the government to

improve access to basic dental care for the escalating national waiting list.

5. In the Netherlands, free entrance to care is now possible for all patients regarding dental hygiene treatment and many assurance companies are willing to pay for the treatment.
6. In Alberta, Canada, the cabinet approved the Dental Hygienists Profession Regulation under the Health Professions Act.

When you go home, talk to colleagues and identify groups who have no access to care and try to do something about it.

I challenge you, at the next international dental hygiene conference in Glasgow in 3 years time, to be there and to tell us what you have all accomplished.

There are endless possibilities. By choosing new perspectives, we can change ourselves from the inside out to improve our relationships, our community and our planet. Let us make our world more wonderful.

Marjolijn Hovius

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