



PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

The future of the dental hygiene profession

The International Federation of Dental Hygienists (IFDH) exists to safeguard and defend the interests of the profession of dental hygiene and to represent and advance the profession of dental hygiene worldwide. As such we strive to promote professional alliances with our association members as well as with other associations, federations and organizations whose objectives are similar to those of the IFDH. We are discussing the creation of guidelines to allow us to partner with other groups to further our goals as well as the goals of like-minded associations.

The IFDH aims to promote and coordinate the exchange of knowledge and information about the profession, its education and its practice. Our new website helps to promote the constant pursuit of professional development and academic expansion for the profession of dental hygiene around the world. The *Research Exchange* page currently lists resources, but will eventually assist dental hygienists around the globe to connect their research interests with others conducting similar research. Similarly, we hope to develop the *Education* and *Community Health* pages. We welcome your ideas and contributions.

One of the goals of the IFDH is to promote access to quality preventive oral health services and to increase public awareness that oral disease can be prevented through proven regimens. We aim to provide a forum for the understanding and discussion of issues pertaining to dental hygiene. Once we are able to implement Special Interest Groups (SIGs), we will be able to include voices other than our current House of Delegates (HOD) and be more inclusive of dental hygienists globally.

There are dental hygienists in many countries around the world. We work together with dentists, dental assistants, dental therapists, dental nurses and other professionals. The earliest established dental hygiene programme was started in the USA in 1913. In 2013, the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) will celebrate 100 years of existence.

In a recent publication from the ADHA, it states that the dental hygiene profession is coming to a crossroads of change that may require difficult personal and collective decisions to either 'seize new roles and leadership opportunities or stay with a familiar yet possibly declining direction' (1). The ADHA commissioned the environmental scan to help ADHA members explore the future of oral health and the changes dental hygienists must make to contribute to the health and well-being of society. It deliberately focuses on issues that challenge assumptions about the profession and suggest exploring new and often challenging opportunities. I believe the concepts in the report can be, for the most part, globalized and generalized. While each country has its own unique set of

circumstances, I find more similarities in the dental hygiene profession globally than I see differences.

Change in life is difficult. But while change is often a fearful prospect for some, or most people, 'nothing endures but change'. Change occurs when an organization evolves through various life cycles, just like people must successfully evolve through life cycles. For organizations to develop, they often must undergo significant change at various points in their development. That is why the topic of organizational change and development has become widespread in communications about business, organizations, leadership and management. The IFDH is no exception, now that it is 25 years old.

Many dental hygienists will continue work as they always have, in whatever setting they have chosen for themselves. It is speculated that increased demand for oral health care might even increase the number of dental hygienists working inside private dental offices. Other dental hygienists, not comfortable with the status quo, will lead the way to the future, moving the profession to new places and possibilities. New opportunities for dental hygienists will most likely materialize in community centres, health care organizations and retail locations. It is hypothesized that advances in science and technology will fundamentally alter oral health care. As the demand for affordable oral healthcare services grows, particularly in underserved communities, natural alliances will evolve among community health, social justice and other groups.

In the UK, Sally Simpson, president of the British Society of Dental Hygiene & Therapy (BSDHT), is urging members to get involved in the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) study to move towards direct access of dental hygiene services to patients. Sally states: 'Please do your part by pledging your support for the removal of the requirement of a referral from a dentist to see a dental hygienist or dental therapist and where possible, by providing evidence of the negative impact denial of direct access has for you and your patients. Let us not miss this opportunity to influence the outcome of this study' (Heraclitus, 540BC–480BC; <http://www.motivatingquotes.com/opportunity.htm>). Sally is calling on hygienists and therapists to influence the future of their profession.

Currently, the scope of practice for dental hygienists varies widely by country, and in some countries by state, region or province. The UK is just one country that is researching ways to get preventive care to the public in a safe and efficient manner. Dental hygienists will need basic business skills for developing a base of clients/patients in new markets and practice areas. Questions that need to be answered are as follows: are dental hygienists prepared to work as independent entrepreneurs?; are dental hygiene schools providing adequate

training in business skills?; how can associations help prepare their members to seize opportunities as they arise? Dental hygienists are well placed to seize these opportunities as providers of quality oral health care (1). Advanced practice dental hygienists with proper education could work in collaboration with medical and community health professionals as part of a care team focused on prevention and wellness.

The profession of dental hygiene is expanding beyond traditional roles and core competencies. In the USA, an indicator of this shift is the growing number of dental hygienists with special permits and permissions to provide care beyond what was originally delineated under their state's laws (1). In 2007, almost half of all dental hygienists (47.3%) reported having a certification or permit to practice under special circumstances such as unsupervised practice (1). Roughly one quarter of the dental hygienists in the same survey held two or more current state licenses (1). I see similar statistics and situations in other countries around the world.

Change will bring adversity and opportunity. 'In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity' (2) (Albert Einstein). The difference in our success or failure is not chance, but choice. When adversity strikes, it is not what happens that will determine our destiny, it is how we react to what happens. It is

important to have an attitude of believing you can do something and having the courage and determination to see it through. Is the profession of dental hygiene ready to move into the future? We must learn and adapt to a changing environment and create a shared vision for the future of dental hygiene. I invite your comments as the profession and its organizations continue to thrive and grow to meet future challenges.

References

- 1 Rhea M, Bettles C. *Dental Hygiene at the Crossroads of Change: Environmental Scan 2011–2021*. Chicago, IL, American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA), 2011. Available at: http://www.adha.org/downloads/ADHA_Environmental_Scan.pdf (accessed 30 December 2011).
- 2 Dentistry.co.uk. *Hygienists Call for Direct Access to Patients*. Dentistry.co.uk, 2011. Available at: <http://www.dentistry.co.uk/news/4703-Oral-health-Hygienists-call-for-direct-access-to-patients> (accessed 30 December 2011).

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