

# The Need for Professional Development Curriculum in Dental Hygiene Education

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"I'm just in it for the money." "I can't afford to belong to my professional association." "I burned out on dental hygiene after three years." How many of you have heard statements like these from dental hygiene students or from licensed dental hygienists? What happens to a student who graduates with high ideals and finds herself/himself disillusioned with their profession shortly after graduation? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have all hygienists retain their passion for the profession and learn to stay energized throughout their career?

For many, the role of clinical private practice is the only track pursued to practice their knowledge and skills. For others, choosing to continue formal education or explore an alternative practice setting has been the choice. A career in Dental Hygiene provides an excellent career choice that affords hygienists with varied options - from the traditional clinical route to Ph.D. Department Chair. Not all hygienists aspire to advanced degrees, or alternative practice settings, but the opportunity exists to those who choose.

"I began my career at nineteen with an Associate Degree in Dental Hygiene in 1968. I practiced for eight years taking courses at the local university toward my BS degree. My next move was into education beginning as a part time clinical instructor and moving into a full time faculty appointment. My first year of full time teaching, I began pursuit of a Master's degree. Upon completion I began my own consulting and professional speaking business. My career continued to grow by completion of a second Master's degree and further development of my business. I recently completed training that qualifies me to deliver high impact training on a variety personal performance topics," quotes Linda Meeuwenberg.

"I to, have advanced my career through formal education channels. As an entrepreneur, my career path went from clinical to education, and onto consulting and owning my own firm. Being selected as a recipient of the ADHA Warner Lambert Excellence in Dental Hygiene Award, was an honor and reward for maintaining my professional development. As a former ADHA President and officer of local and state associations, I have kept my energy high through involvement with the issues and surrounding myself with people who are energized. Being able to address audiences around the world has given me a perspective on the number of issues that are universal to hygienists, no matter if you live in Israel or Chicago," states JoAnn Guernlian.

Whether one chooses to practice in the clinical setting, or complement their dental hygiene degree with additional education, a passion for continued professional growth is the key to improved career satisfaction. Continued professional development can e achieved through many avenues other than formal degrees. For instance, continuing education courses, alternative practice settings, foreign travel and missionary sites provide a renewed sense of professional commitment. "I know hygienists who have practiced well over 20 years in the clinical arena and love it. They have learned how to stay re-energized by challenging their minds and spirit.

Burnout was been attributed to the following factors according to a 1992 research project conducted by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company: prolonged periods of high stress -- characterized by feelings of hopelessness, and thoughts of leaving and withdrawing from work. This is a consequence of two key ingredients: A high level of job demands and little control over one' s work.A high correlation exists between job burnout and the following factors: Lack of teamwork, lack of job challenge, poor quality of supervision, unfair treatment, lack of employee involvement, heavy workload, and an organization's inability to deal with change.

We need to prepare our students with attitudes and beliefs that promote a life long quest for professional development. Empowerment strategies to sustain enthusiasm for a career choice

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can be taught in school. If a feeling of hopelessness leads to burnout than we need to teach the early warning signs and provide resources for changing this attitude early in it's development. Teaching skills in communication, teambuilding, leadership, coping with stress, collaboration, and flexibility need to be integral parts of the curriculum. Too often these are considered "nice to know" topics and are taught "if we have time".

Tomorrow's leaders need to know about leadership models that will propel them into high level decision making positions. If our profession is to survive all the changes that lie ahead we need to teach our students about shared leadership. A model developed by Kragness (1994) asserts that there are twelve dimensions to leadership, which can be effective dependent upon the needs of the situation and the needs of the followers. Leadership is based on relationships and trust. Leadership is dynamic. It continually changes dependent upon the situation. If we can teach our students to collaborate, share leadership roles, increase flexibility, and engage in activities that promote the welfare of all, then we can rest assured that our profession will out live us.

Students struggle with leadership roles when entering their professional sequence and becoming a class officer or student organization leader. If we can teach them their naturally occurring leadership styles and give them confidence to share leadership within their organization we can minimize apathy, improve relationships, and build skills that will last a lifetime. For instance, administering a self-report tool, developed by Kragness, students can develop a profile based upon the self-administered assessment. The profile would enable them to identify their leadership strengths, learn when to lead, and when to follow. Sharing leadership requires trust and a spirit of collegiality - two traits that go on serving long after graduation. We will perform better at the office and with our professional association with an attitude of cooperation.

Learning to part of a team is a skill that employers and colleagues will appreciate. No one likes to work with a person who is a "know it all" and/or refuses to carry their share of the office responsibilities. The image of the "prima donna" hygienist needs to be broken down as our new leaders emerge willing to collaborate with all the person's employed in the dental arena. Teaching our students that "attitude is everything", is a life long gift that will enable them to master their career, even under difficult situations.

Difficult situations occur to all of mankind. Choosing how we respond to the situation is our choice. According to Conklin, author of *Adventures in Attitudes®*, we use three times as much energy when we are thinking negatively. Spending our time blaming, whining, criticizing, and dousing our sorrows with food and drink is a conscious choice. Just as we choose our clothing we can choose our attitude. This is our gift as human beings. No one makes us tired, bored, stressed, or angry. We choose those feelings dependent on our responses to people and situations. "Not until you have learned to choose your attitudes will you really have the power and freedom to be your own person, capable of determining and achieving your goals and dreams," as quoted by Conklin.

Educators need to unite in a spirit of collaboration to build curriculum that produces responsible and passionate dental hygienists that go beyond the idealism of a new graduate; Creating hygienists who are eager to aspire to their individual greatness through pursuit of short and long term goals. "After thirty years investment in dental hygiene, I can say that I am as excited about my role today as I was the day I went through my capping ceremony", says Meeuwenberg. We need to continually re-charge our spirit, minds, and bodies. We worked too hard as students to achieve the knowledge and skills of our profession to let our minds die. Dental Hygiene Forever!

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Linda Meeuwenberg, RDH, MA, MA is the founder of Professional Development Association, Inc. She also serves as Professor of Dental Hygiene at Ferris State University and is a practicing hygienist in a Summer Migrant Health Clinic. A member of the National Speakers' Association, Chamber of Commerce, and International Rotary she has presented numerous programs internationally.

JoAnn Gurenlian, RDH, PhD is the CEO of Gurenlian and Associates. She is a former ADHA President and an internationally recognized speaker and scholar with over 50 published articles. She is a former ADHA Warner Lambert *Excellence in Dental Hygiene* recipient.

JoAnn and Linda presented "A Model for the Development of Effective Women Leaders" at the *Women's Leadership Conference - Global Alliances for Advancing Education, Research, and Womsn's Health* sponsored by the American Association of Dental Schools held in Cannes/Mandelieu, France.

For additional information on curriculum development, CE courses, or personal empowerment materials please phone: 888.951.4489 or fax 609.216.0515. Email [meeuwen@centurytel.net](mailto:meeuwen@centurytel.net)

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