

## Supporting Our Communities of Scholars

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Recently, I was invited to speak to the incoming class of graduate learners enrolled in the Master of Science in dental hygiene program at the University of California San Francisco. This cohort of learners were just beginning their scholarly journey and I was there to share the National Dental Hygiene Research Agenda (NDHRA) of the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA), a fairly weighty topic for the second day of class! However, the invitation gave me time to reflect on the role that research plays in the lives of all dental hygienists, no matter where we are in our education or career. The word research often elicits the image of someone in a white lab coat tucked away at the end of a long corridor, far removed from the real world. Clinicians are often unaware of the ongoing and meticulous efforts of their dental hygienist research colleagues and the role that their work plays in building the foundation for our profession. In my new role as managing editor for the *Journal of Dental Hygiene*, I have developed a much deeper appreciation for the role that ADHA plays in supporting the research that will ultimately advance the dental hygiene profession.

As with many things in life, it is often the work that is done behind the scenes, frequently without a lot of fanfare, that makes an impact extending far beyond its boundaries. ADHA has had a long-standing commitment to support the growth of the unique body of knowledge that defines us as a profession and contributes to the ongoing development of our scholarly discipline. ADHA has defined the discipline of dental hygiene, as the art and science of preventive oral health care that includes the management of behaviors to prevent oral disease and promote health.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting back on our beginnings as preventive care providers for school children and the words of Dr. Alfred C. Fones, that a dental hygienist must "regard herself as the channel through which dentistry's knowledge of mouth hygiene is to be disseminated,"<sup>2</sup> we have faced many challenges in establishing our own discipline. It would not be until the first conference on dental hygiene research was held at the University of Manitoba in Canada in 1982, followed by subsequent ADHA conferences on the evolving roles of dental hygienists and the

adoption of the first NDHRA by the ADHA House of Delegates in 1994,<sup>2</sup> that the foundation would be laid for growing our unique body of knowledge. The NDHRA continues to evolve the direction for dental hygiene researchers and promote the activities of the profession through revisions in 2001, 2007 and most recently in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

Getting back to my recent presentation, it gave me pause to consider the approach I would take with these newly initiated graduate learners. What was their exposure to research and the supporting role that our professional association has played in this ongoing process? Did they think that the two existed in separate silos? What was their view of the ADHA? Was it just another association of dental hygienists calling out for members or was there deeper significance. After all, only about one third of the program directors in my state even hold membership in ADHA and I wondered how this influenced their perceptions. I also wanted to know how they viewed themselves as members of our profession and future leaders. As their professor, Liz Couch RDH, MS, explained in her opening day lecture, our conceptual models, or lenses, shapes how we view our actions in dental hygiene. How had their entry level-education experiences shaped their broader personal identity as dental hygienists? Did they view dental hygiene as an occupation or a profession?

As educators, we often forget about the importance of the lens that we view all things related to our profession. The focus of entry-level dental hygiene education can often become requirement driven for clinical competency and the ongoing role of research to support clinical decisions and ultimately improved oral and systemic health for the public can often be lost. Similarly, the role of membership in our professional association and ADHA's direct support for the countless intangible benefits of research, health policy and advocacy are often lost when providing students with the lists of discounts and tangible member benefits.



These graduate learners were truly on the threshold of discovering of their scholarly identity and their potential for advancing the profession with the support of a much larger community of mentors and peers focused on lifelong scholarship and development; exactly the vision first articulated by UCSF's first program director, the late Margaret Walsh, RDH, EdD.<sup>4</sup> Clarifying the role that ADHA plays in supporting their new community of scholars was an opportunity to change their conceptual model of our professional association. Viewing what happens behind the scenes to support the growth of the dental hygiene discipline through the lens of a scholar has the potential to change the perceived role that professional associations play. As the communities of dental hygiene scholars continues to grow in graduate programs across the country, ADHA has unique opportunities to support them through the *Journal of Dental Hygiene*. I am honored to be a part of this process.

## References

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