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The Importance of Mentoring

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I received an email recently from a former dental hygiene student. My first teaching position was in Texas and I was a very green, young faculty member. The former student and I had not communicated in over 20 years so it was such a nice surprise to hear from her. In her email, she wrote, that I was "a role model to her then and to this day." I cannot think of a nicer compliment to my professional life than to be a role model and mentor to others. Are you mentoring other dental hygienists? Are you seeking mentoring from someone from whom you wish to learn about our profession? This editorial is to challenge you, if you are not doing so already, to take on that role of mentor or protégé.

The term 'mentor' comes from Homer's Odyssey. Odysseus had a son named Telemachus. When Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan wars he left Telemachus in the care of the nobleman Mentor. Assuming the form of Mentor, Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, was able to give Telemachus some useful advice. Thus, Athena, in the form of Mentor, acted as an advisor to the young Telemachus and helped him meet challenging obstacles.

What about the role of mentoring in our profession? Katherine Schrubbe, BSDH, MEd, wrote an excellent article in the *Journal of Dental Education* in 2004 on mentorship and its relationship to professional growth and academic success. In it, she describes mentors as:

- One who has the ability to inspire confidence in others, push them to their limits, and continue to develop them to their greatest potential;
- People who can see more in you than you see in yourself;
- One who creates a vision and development plan that takes advantage of the proteges's strengths, abilities, and potential for growth; and,
- A facilitator of independence, self-confidence, job satisfaction, and upward mobility.

When I reflect back to the professional mentors I have had in my life, I see several individuals. My first professional mentors in dental hygiene were my instructors in dental hygiene school. They worked tirelessly to teach me the skills and knowledge to become the best dental hygienist I could be. They stressed the importance of being an active member of my professional association and to speak up and help move the profession forward. I have an advanced degree today partially because one of my faculty members (who only had an associate degree herself) told me that I **COULD** and **SHOULD** do it! So...I did it. **The take home message here is...When you see potential in another dental hygienist or someone who could become a dental hygienist-TELL THEM! It might turn their world around.**

What about my mentors in writing? I was not born a natural writer. During my first couple of years of teaching, I had the privilege of working with the former editor-in-chief of the Journal of Dental Education. He offered a workshop to faculty to teach them how to become better authors. I asked him to critique a paper I was writing. The first critique was difficult to read because there was so much red ink on the pages. I swallowed my pride and worked on it some more. The second critique looked almost as red. By the next revision, I was ready to submit it for publication and it was accepted! Now, my role is to help others improve in their writing and research skills. Daily, either with students or with other dental hygienists who submit to the Journal, I have an obligation to facilitate their learning and desire to write, publish, and contribute to the dental hygiene body of knowledge. **The take home message here is...if you have a desire to be better at something, find someone who is excellent at it and open yourself up to learn from them. If you have exceptional skills in your profession, TEACH someone!**

I now have the privilege of mentoring future leaders in dental hygiene. I call it a privilege because I consider it an honor as well as one my most important roles. The profession of dental hygiene has changed my life and provided more joy and intellectual stimulation than I could ever imagine. I want to thank my mentors for the gift of their time, encouragement, and enthusiasm that they gave me along the way. I want you to ask yourself...who am I mentoring, how can I encourage others to get involved, stay involved, contribute to the profession, contribute to the scientific literature, and become a productive change agent for the American Dental Hygienists' Association and all that it represents? I also want you to ask yourself how you can grow in the profession, who are the dental hygiene leaders you admire, and how can you learn from them. Ask one of them to be your mentor. **The take home message here is ... JUST DO IT! You have nothing to lose and much to gain!**

Have a great spring!

Sincerely,

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Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Dental Hygiene*