

Pathway to Our Future



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June is the time for celebrating graduations, looking ahead with our annual conference, and moving forward. As we look to the future, we sometimes need to assess our past. As two past presidents of the American Dental Hygienists' Association (1984 and 1990), we reflect with pride on our profession's progress, yet we still feel the struggle within the profession with so much to accomplish. In her book, "Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead," Sheryl Sandberg notes that women often hold themselves back in their careers. She encourages the reader to seek challenges, take risks and pursue goals with gusto. We believe there are many parallels to the dental hygiene profession found in "Lean In." Like Sandberg, we are here to prompt, support, and inspire action.

Look at where we are in practice settings - with less or no supervision, opening of direct access across the country, improvements in Medicaid reimbursements, and advancements of services provided by dental hygienists. We are still charged when hearing questions regarding practicing to the full extent of our education, and somewhat defeated when there continue to be restrictive limitations in state practice acts and regulations.

Let's look at some examples of what our future could be if we were to collectively take action as clinicians and educators. Consider what the profession of dental hygiene would be if all educational communities joined to support baccalaureate degree as entry level and worked to support articulation and dual entry programs. What would happen if we stopped saying we do not have enough time to teach teledentistry, geriatrics, research, HPV, access to care, practice management and the whole list of content we know is needed in our curriculum? What would happen if we taught to the full level of our commitment to the public, regardless of state

definitions? Or if we advanced our definitions to become universal and held to that premise, regardless of dental boards recreating restrictive practice acts? What would happen if we created extended curriculums, certifications, and continuing education to meet national needs?

Our progress to date is exciting and motivating. Look at the efforts to move dental hygienists into a category to receive vaccines early and administer the vaccines in many states. When we work together, supporting ADHA in its lobbying efforts and advance our profession, we can see the great rewards from these efforts. Our Task Force on Return to Work and the recent studies published in this journal regarding the practice of dental hygiene before and during COVID-19 are the tip of elevating our profession.

Yet, we are often our own worst enemies. We continue to fear practice acts, call ourselves hygienists instead of oral healthcare professionals, schedule "cleanings" instead of preventive health and wellness visits, while there are so many actions we could be taking to advance our profession. Even reading other professional publications for dental hygiene, we find that concepts of national licensure and standard scope of practice are still a dream. Driving across state lines should not determine a difference in our clinical practice abilities.

For the last 16 months, we have been focused on a pandemic. Eventually, COVID-19 will be resolved or we will move to an endemic. What will happen when we return to the status quo of employers determining what our dental hygiene practice will be or educators acquiescing to the rules of unknowing boards and commissions granting permission for our abilities to practice? Is that really what we want for our future? To settle? To let others determine what is in the best

interest of our profession? What would happen if we decided that if we can survive a pandemic, we are certainly capable of controlling our profession, and then take action?

Here are some thoughts for our future.

Educators

Teach beyond your state practice act to a national standard. Articulate with other programs for advanced degrees or certificates in higher skills as the new norm for our education. Question state practice acts and become actively involved in advocacy to create change, working together with both professionals and students. Research and publish on how dental hygienists utilize our professional standards of care, to document what is being taught and further performed in practice.

Practitioners

Document the care you are providing using standard codes and then publish the results of your treatment. Publishing your results in the literature will help build data needed for advocacy and changing practice acts. Continue to learn skills beyond your current education and seek certification opportunities. Follow advances in clinical practice being made in other states and be an advocate for nationwide change.

Students

Think critically, act autonomously, and use scientific evidence to base your clinical decisions. Learn how to conduct research to create the body of knowledge in the literature to support the profession and advocacy efforts.

We hope all of you will join us at the Educator's workshops (both in-person and virtual) at the annual conference, to engage in discourse and create the pathway to our future.

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