

Defining the Profession in the 21st Century



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As a writer and an editor, I spend a considerable amount of time every day working with words. Small changes in a word choice or tense can make a big difference in the meaning conveyed in a manuscript. The wrong word choice can lead to misunderstanding or misleading the reader. However, looking past the written word, it is important to look at how word choice impacts all aspects of life, especially when we consider our professional identity. How we identify ourselves within healthcare impacts the future of the dental hygiene profession. While there are many opportunities for dental hygienists to expand access to preventive oral health care services, and participate as members of interprofessional health care teams, some of the challenges to these opportunities can come from how we perceive ourselves. Do we see ourselves as “hygienists” providing “gentle cleanings,” or do we see ourselves as oral health care professionals providing comprehensive, preventive oral health care services? While most of us will say the latter, unfortunately the public perception is that we primarily “clean teeth” and also scold them about flossing.

This image was brought into clear focus recently when the Illinois Dental Society’s lobbyist, Dave Marsh was quoted in the news media stating, “I just don’t feel anybody with a two-year associate degree is medically qualified to correct your health. They are trained to clean teeth. They take a sharp little instrument and scrape your teeth.... That’s all they do.”¹

As incorrect as Mr. Marsh’s comments are, every time we allow others to advertise our services as “dental cleanings”, or even “deep cleanings,” we continue

to reinforce this perception. Rather than remaining silent, as a profession we must work to change these perceptions from within, as well as in the eyes of the public.

Word choice can have a lasting impact on our professional identity. We know that oral health is essential to overall health and well-being, and that as oral health care professionals, we are essential health care providers. However, we must promote and see ourselves as the oral health care professionals we are, as opposed to being part of a larger dental industry which has become focused on cosmetic procedures and smile design. While promoting and advancing oral health care certainly involves economics, the focus should be on increasing access to essential oral health care services in a cost-effective manner, rather than a business venture.

Reflecting over the past twenty years, we have published numerous manuscripts and studies on the pivotal role dental hygienists are ready to play in addressing oral health disparities. In this issue we have three manuscripts focusing on the education, career paths and scholarly work opportunities available as the profession moves beyond the associate degree.

We now have state legislation allowing for mid-level oral health providers in twelve states with ongoing legislation in nine additional states.² Some form of direct access to dental hygiene care is now available in forty-two states.² The opportunities outside of clinical practice are expanding and we have the education and skills to meet the complex oral health needs of a diverse population. We provide oral care that extends far beyond “cleaning teeth.” It is time that we define ourselves as the essential oral health care providers that we truly are.

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References

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