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## Outward and Onward

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I am writing this just after returning from the American Dental Hygienists' Association's (ADHA) 81st annual session. As always, I was inspired and energized by being with my friends and colleagues from across the country. The special interest sessions, student activities, and continuing education courses were outstanding. The ADHA House of Delegates (HOD) actions and reports from ADHA officers and senior staff indicate that association leaders are united in their goal of securing a strong future for dental hygiene. Given the increasing national interest in addressing the country's long-standing access to oral health care issues, it is logical to assume that dental hygiene will have a prominent role in future oral health care delivery systems designed to reduce these inequities. However, it would be unwise for ADHA to act based on assumptions. Fortunately for all dental hygienists, ADHA is methodically building the infrastructure to base actions on facts rather than assumptions in order to create a bright future for dental hygiene.



In a bold move to secure a broader role for dental hygienists in future oral health care delivery, the 2004 HOD almost unanimously adopted policy advocating the creation of a new category of professionals within dental hygiene, the advanced dental hygiene practitioner. The HOD adopted two other related resolutions to define the advanced dental hygiene practitioner by the services they would be prepared to provide, and to stipulate that dental hygienists wishing to gain the advanced dental hygiene practitioner credential would complete an ADHA approved advanced education curriculum. Work toward implementing this policy is already underway.

The matter of specialties within dental hygiene has been discussed from time to time over many years. It is likely that previous discussions did not lead to specific actions because of other more pressing issues, such as student recruitment,

and preceptor ship threats that were launched simultaneously in states throughout the country. With new documentation of the extent of the unmet oral health care needs in certain vulnerable populations, national and state policy makers are more open to discussions about broader roles for providers other than dentists to address that need. Because of these external conditions and dental hygiene's willingness to pursue change, this is an ideal time to develop and launch the program to educate advanced dental hygiene practitioners. To take advantage of this opportunity, dental hygiene needs to adopt a fast-forward posture in planning to meet the challenges that most surely lie ahead.

In thinking about how we might best respond to the obvious and immediate challenges to the future of dental hygiene, the Outward Bound program came to my mind. Many of you will remember this program that was begun in Great Britain in the early days of World War II to prepare young seamen for the task ahead, and then introduced in our country in 1961 in Colorado. The Outward Bound program has changed over the years but is still active in helping people build self-esteem, internal fortitude, and confidence through personal achievement.

Recalling Outward Bound, at least for me, brings mental images of firm, muscular young people dressed and outfitted for outdoor activities and setting off to attain some extraordinary goal while overcoming obstacles that would stop ordinary people in their tracks. I also visualize these outdoor enthusiasts resting in camps at the end of the day, sharing their experiences and, all in all, having a great time. There are no slackers in this picture, for while some may have bruises and blistered feet, all remain committed to following through with a dream. While my mental image is a pretty picture, it fails to portray the extensive preparation young people must undergo as a requirement for participating in this program. Without doubt, the Outward Bound program created conditions through which hundreds of young people gained the confidence and self-esteem that enabled them to lead extraordinarily diverse and meaningful lives.

In a similar fashion, the almost unanimous vote of the 81st ADHA HOD to create the advanced dental hygiene practitioner set the stage for dental hygiene to move ahead. Moving ahead means changing in ways that promise to bring personal satisfaction and build self-esteem while bringing oral health services to multitudes of powerless people who have been previously, for the most part, unnoticed. Now that this stage is set, I suggest that certain follow-through activities must be undertaken to safeguard our current status and support future dental hygiene practice.

Obviously, ADHA will develop a standardized curriculum for the advanced dental hygiene practitioner and develop a process to approve and monitor educational programs as they develop. It is also obvious that ADHA must prepare to assist dental hygiene educational programs wishing to gain institutional approval to offer this advanced education. Clearly, a system to regulate advanced dental hygiene practice must be established and institutionalized. Because advanced dental hygiene practitioners will be prepared for practice in settings outside the traditional private dental office, reimbursement for dental hygiene care must be clarified in all states. There are many other steps along the way to creating a fully functioning advanced dental hygiene practitioner, and ADHA has already identified most of them. However, one activity is so critical to our future that it deserves special emphasis.

Although ADHA supports research conducted by dental hygienists in a number of ways, primarily through the work of the association's research council and the ADHA Institute for Oral Health research grants, stimulating new dental hygiene research continues to be challenging. I was encouraged by the number of really good dental hygiene research posters presented at this year's annual session. Most were the work of undergraduate dental hygiene students, and that's exciting. The truth is that only a few of these talented students will ever again engage in research once they are graduated. Is it possible that our entry-level dental hygiene curriculum is structured to only funnel graduates into the traditional role? Is it possible to persuade talented students that they can have a rewarding future in research? Are dental hygiene faculty good role models for students who are extraordinarily effective critical thinkers, and therefore, might be promising researchers? How can we influence dental hygiene students who are blessed with natural curiosity to continue their formal education and gain the advanced degrees that are necessary to pursue research careers? Is it possible that, over all, dental hygienists fail to see the need to strengthen our profession's research base?

All of these and many other questions must be addressed for dental hygiene to move out of its static, fifty year old practice mode. Dental hygiene education, regulation and practice, and research must simultaneously change in order for our profession to advance. We hobble our profession when we minimize the importance of research, as it provides the foundation for all professional education and practice. It is most certainly necessary to bring about essential regulatory changes. Perhaps evidence that we are making headway with respect to research will come in the form of more research reports that contribute to the dental hygiene knowledge base being published in the *Journal of Dental Hygiene*.

This is an exciting time for our profession. Our leadership has asked us to envision a future in which dental hygiene education, regulation and practice, and research will adapt to the environment and change to meet the oral health care needs of all Americans. I predict that in bringing this vision to reality, dental hygienists everywhere will gain the professional self-esteem, confidence, and fortitude to participate in establishing dental hygienists as essential health care providers. I am truly privileged to have the opportunity to encourage my dental hygiene colleagues everywhere to think of the possibilities that lie ahead. I believe its time to put on hiking boots, pack a bag, and prepare to move outward and onward for a future filled with limitless possibilities. I look forward to the experiences we will share along the way.