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Combining Research and Dental Hygiene

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Are you interested in how periodontal disease affects the body? Do you have a theory on how a product or medicine affects the oral cavity? Do you wonder how dental-related materials and therapies work and if they are effective? Then research may be a way for you to combine your dental hygiene knowledge, satisfy your quest for more in-depth knowledge of a subject, and answer your question. This is how it happened for me while I was a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The opportunity for me to combine research and dental hygiene began in the baccalaureate program through a specialty track focused on research. Students were connected with faculty members and together they developed and executed a research project. My first research project was to study the relationship between oral lichen planus and squamous cell carcinoma. This project piqued my interest and began my love of research. I have now celebrated my 10-year anniversary in research.

My experiences in research have been varied and meaningful. I participated in one of the landmark studies on periodontitis and pregnancy while earning my master's degree, which better prepared to pursue my career in research. My first job, an entry-level position, was as a research dental hygienist collecting study data on the relationship of periodontitis and its effects on pregnancy outcomes. This position increased my knowledge about research and I was given the opportunity to write regulatory documents, complete Internal Review Board application, and learn how to coordinate all aspects of a study. This interdisciplinary study required coordination with the research staff, physicians, nurses, and other health care providers without compromising patient care. During this study I began mentoring other dental hygienists who were interested in working in research.

My next position was to serve as a principal investigator for a small device study. This helped me better understand the process of a study from start to finish, including how to accurately budget for all expenses related to the project. While working on the device study I also began in my current position as a clinical research manager. This position requires me to work with a team of people including investigators, statisticians, clinical research team members, and others to design and implement studies, train study coordinators, and work as a monitor. To be effective in this line of work, it is important to be a team player but also be able to work independently.

During my tenure, I have been fortunate to conduct many types of research, including periodontitis and pregnancy outcomes, novel interdental devices, powered brushes, experimental gingivitis and devices, surveys of dental knowledge, and a validation study to produce a questionnaire that will determine when a pregnant woman should be referred for a periodontal evaluation.

The rewarding part of research is to see the significant changes that occur because of the results and findings of studies. As a result of the work that has been done with periodontitis and pregnancy, physicians are now more aware of the need for better oral health care, and some valuable improvements have been made in respect to social policy. Some health insurance carriers now pay for scaling and root planing for pregnant women and this has a positive effect on the health of mothers and infants.

There are many mechanisms for dental hygienists to become involved in research. Some of these include working in an academic setting that actively conducts research, working in a clinical research organization, working for a start-up research company, working on community-based projects and working in private-practice research. As a dental hygienist, you have training and knowledge that allows you to work not only in dental related but in various areas research.

If you have an inquisitive mind or have unanswered questions then research may be something you would find fulfilling. Working in research has provided me the opportunity to use my health care knowledge to benefit society.