

Who Will Teach the Next Generation of Dental Hygienists?

Rebecca Wilder, RDH, BS, MS

One of my greatest professional mentors is retiring in September. Mary George, RDH, MEd has been in dental hygiene academia since the late 1960s. She developed the current graduate program in dental hygiene for which I am the director. What an impact she made on my life and continues to do so today.

When I graduated from high school, I was educated as a dental assistant and then worked at the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Dentistry for one year. During that year, I spoke with Mary George who was the current director of the Dental Auxiliary Teacher Education (D.A.T.E.) program. I told her of my interest in teaching but that I was torn between teaching dental assisting or dental hygiene. I thought that I might want to pursue dental hygiene and then teach. She was patient, reassuring and encouraging. She had just the qualities I wanted to have one day. During dental hygiene school, Mary visited our school because one of her students was a teaching intern and Mary was there to observe. Again, I told her that I, too, wanted to be a teacher one day. Her students were fantastic, and I wanted to be like them! Several years later and several degrees later, I had the opportunity to return to UNC for a full time teaching position. My position was divided into thirds and one third of my time was with Mary, teaching in the D.A.T.E. program. I loved teaching with her and the other faculty in the program. We had a faculty of 5 and we were a



real team! Academia was fun and stimulating and I looked forward to going to work! I remember one time when the faculty met at my house and we developed an entire curriculum in one afternoon. We were innovative, energetic and free to speak our minds, and extremely supportive of each other!

Mary was able to promote that kind of creativity in others. She has mentored numerous dental hygiene faculty and leaders throughout her time at UNC. She will be greatly missed, not only at UNC, but throughout dental hygiene education. But I am grateful to have had her for my mentor. I will carry those memories and, hopefully, her philosophy throughout my career!

All of this has led me to wonder who will teach the next generation of dental hygienists? I certainly have educated many wonderful dental hygienists who are contributing to academia and

have successful careers. But will we be able to guide a sufficient number of dental hygienists into academia who will love their jobs and stay in the field? Certainly the growth for the dental hygiene profession is huge. The growth rate is predicted to be about 36% until 2018.¹ A 2009 ADEA publication stated that 131 new dental hygiene programs have received accreditation since 1990!² However, many dental hygiene programs have difficulty attracting qualified faculty to their institutions. A 2004 publication reported that 36% of dental hygiene programs had vacancies for full time faculty.³ I can only imagine what the numbers are now since so many new programs have opened. We also lack diversity in dental hygiene education. We desperately need more African American/Black educators, Hispanic educators and other underrepresented minorities. And, as of 2009, only 28.2% of full time dental hygiene faculty have a master's degree and only 2.7 % a doctoral degree. Twenty two percent have a DDS/DMD degree.⁴ That means that the vast majority of full time dental hygiene educators do not have an advanced degree. What does this mean for the future? I wish I had the answers.

What I do know is that we need to strongly encourage qualified, enthusiastic dental hygienists to pursue advanced degrees to enter academia. With the future changes projected in the dental hygiene profession, we need academicians who can be creative, dedicated and excellent teachers. We need dental hygiene leaders who have vision

and who can facilitate growth in others. We need dental hygiene academicians who lead by example and promote the highest qual-

ity of skill, professionalism and ethical standards. We need more faculty like Mary!

Sincerely,
Rebecca Wilder, RDH, BS, MS
Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Dental Hygiene

References

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