



Tobacco and Oral Health: A Call to Action

In 1989, a visionary in the dental profession, Dr. Robert Mecklenburg, secured funding from the National Institutes of Health to create the National Dental Tobacco Free Steering Committee. As the name implied, the committee's purpose was to encourage oral health organizations and its members to enhance their role in advocacy for a tobacco-free society. I was so fortunate to have been named the ADHA and eventually the ADEA's representative during the committee's 10 year existence. During one of our meetings, Dr. C. Everett Koop, the Former U.S. Surgeon General, addressed the National Dental Tobacco Free Steering Committee. I have always remembered his inspirational words as he called upon the oral health professions, particularly dental hygiene, to take the lead in tobacco prevention and cessation activities for our nation. He based his statement on our ability to motivate patients along with having approximately an hour of precious time to teach patients during clinical dental hygiene treatment.

Between 1990 and today, ADHA and ADEA have included CE courses at their respective annual sessions and have published journal and Web site articles. ADEA created the Tobacco Free Special Interest Group, and ADHA developed their practice-based cessation model, "Ask Advise Refer." The ADA's Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) responded by including tobacco use prevention and cessation questions on the Dental Hygiene National Board Examination and included tobacco prevention and cessation among the CODA accreditation standards. Leading textbooks in dental hygiene teach dental hygiene students how to create and implement successful programs. Driven by such textbooks, national board questions, CODA standards and professional ethics, dental hygiene educational programs have strengthened tobacco prevention and cessation information throughout the curricula in hopes that future dental hygiene practitioners would consider this as much a part of practice as teaching oral plaque removal.

At the time of inception of our committee, tobacco use was our nation's number one preventable public

health problem. Unfortunately, it remains in the top 3 today. Recently, the Centers for Disease Control released data stating that cigarette smoking, which has declined over the past 10 years, is still estimated to cause 1 in 5 deaths each year, or 443,000 deaths annually in the U.S. (including deaths from secondhand smoke). According to TobaccoFreeKids, total annual public and private health care expenditures caused by smoking is \$96 billion.¹

But have we done enough? Considering that dental hygiene undergraduate programs have had competency statements related to tobacco use in place for at least 10 years, one would assume that dental hygienists' formal knowledge and self confidence related to counseling tobacco patients would increase, thus increasing this service in day-to-day practice. However, there remains a paucity of literature published over the past 10 years related to dental hygienists taking the lead in tobacco prevention and cessation activities, either in public clinics or private practice. The literature has suggested that the identical barriers, reimbursement and lack of confidence that influence dentists' hesitation to implement tobacco prevention and cessation activities continue to discourage us from implementing this most needed patient service.² Leaders in all dental hygiene related organizations must continue to educate and encourage future and practicing oral health team members to provide tobacco prevention and cessation for each patient.

Hopefully, this edition of the *Journal of Dental Hygiene* will serve as a call to action. To quote Dr. Christoph Ramseier from his 2009 article in the *International Journal of Dental Hygiene*, "second to regular mechanical plaque control, tobacco use cessation has become the most important measure for the treatment of periodontal diseases."³ I concur with Dr. Ramseier, and would like to add prevention and treatment of most oral diseases.

Sincerely,

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References

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