

Doctoral Education in Dental Hygiene: From Dream to Reality – Almost!

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There are a couple of times during the year when one tends to set goals. One of those times is on January 1st and the other is the beginning of a new school year. As we start a new academic year, I wonder what your goals are for your professional career.

A goal of our profession has been to create a discipline-specific doctoral degree in dental hygiene. Currently there are several dental hygienists with doctoral degrees, many of whom contribute to the JDH Editorial Review Board. However, each of these dental hygienists has been forced to obtain a doctoral degree outside of the dental hygiene discipline because there was simply no other option. While obtaining a doctoral degree in any discipline is an achievement to which the professional should be applauded, not having a doctoral degree in dental hygiene takes away the opportunity for focused mentoring and learning of extensive discipline specific content in dental hygiene.

Why is a doctoral degree necessary? Several key articles have been written on this subject. Ortega et al noted that "Doctoral prepared dental hygienists will be needed to teach masters-level graduate dental hygiene learners and to engage in administrative and leadership roles in health care organizations with impending changes in health care policies."¹ Gurenlian et al have written about doctoral education in dental hygiene and predict that if dental hygienists want to assume leadership positions in the future, they will need a doctoral degree.² These positions include leadership in universities and colleges, state and federal health care agencies, professional or health care organizations, research leadership in universities, corporations, federal agencies, health care administration for school districts, health care management organizations, insurance officer, and hospital administration.²

Steps are moving in the direction of a Doctorate in Dental Hygiene. The ADHA published "Dental Hygiene: Focus on Advancing the Profession" in 2005 where a recommendation was made to create doctoral programs in dental hygiene.³ The International Federation of Dental Hygienists' and American Dental Education Association have discussed the need for a dental hygiene doctoral degree.^{4,5} A monumental symposium was held in 2013, a collaboration with ADHA and the Sante Fe Group. The conclusion was change is needed if dental hygiene education is to keep up with the evolving health-care environment.⁶

The dream of having a discipline specific doctoral degree in dental hygiene is here... at least almost! Currently, there is one PhD program in dental hygiene at the University of Namseoul in South Korea.⁷ Two other programs are in the

planning stages at Idaho State University and the University of Alberta in Canada. As these programs become official and start accepting doctoral students, I predict the demand will soar.

Finally, I would like to highlight one of the papers published in this issue of the JDH. Authors Ursula GM Tumath, RDH, MS, and Margaret Walsh, RDH, MS, MA, EdD, conducted a study of dental hygiene master's degree students to assess their perceptions about doctoral education. They reported that 77% indicated a doctoral degree in dental hygiene is needed to advance the profession and almost half (43%) expressed interest in enrolling in a doctoral program in the next 5 years.⁷ It is an exciting time in dental hygiene! The possibilities are endless!

Sincerely,

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