

## Health Misinformation: The Role of the Dental Hygienist in Providing Evidence-Based Information



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Health information has never been so accessible as it is today. Some of us are old enough to remember that you had to visit a library to find a reference book or periodical to research information on diseases and disorders. However, when the Internet became available to the public in 1993, both the creation and access to information was open to all. Add in the convenience the mobile devices that have become essential for activities of daily living, and it is easy to see the challenges in differentiating health information based on scientific evidence and health misinformation. As oral health care professionals, it is important for dental hygienists to understand basic scientific principles, be able to access accurate information, and ultimately share this knowledge in the delivery of patient care.

### ***Understanding Research Principles***

Dental hygiene practice is based on published research, which means that practitioners should make decisions based on scientific evidence rather than anecdotal tradition or personal preferences. However, to accurately interpret research and incorporate these findings, dental hygienists must understand basic research principles. Accreditation standards include the incorporation of research into the curriculum to prepare dental hygiene students with the necessary skills to understand and critically evaluate research. These skills are designed to lay the framework for evidence-based decision making as future health care providers.

### ***Searching for Accurate Information***

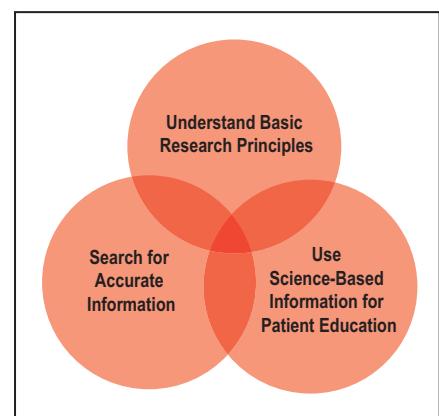
The first step in using evidence in practice, is the ability to locate accurate information. While searching

the Internet may be dental hygienists' first choice for answer a clinical question, health care providers need to be familiar with the resources available through vetted websites and search engines. Dental hygienists must also be familiar with the level of evidence and the importance of reported results from research studies. For example, a published case report will not have the same weight or significance as a randomized control trial, and a systematic review synthesizes the results from multiple similar studies. It is also important to review the sources and funding or sponsorship of the research for any potential bias in the study, critical skills for any consumer of health information.

### ***Dental Hygienists as Health Educators***

Our role as health educator emphasizes the need to provide accurate information to improve the health of our patients and the public. This role is even more critical considering the challenges of misinformation promoted during the current pandemic. The public health crisis aside, the range of dental care products available to the public has increased exponentially in recent years. As oral health care professionals, dental hygienists must be able to read and understand scientific reports to assist patients in discerning true evidence from false advertising claims. Patients have become active participants in their dental care, a transformation that has benefitted both the patient and the practitioner. Dental hygienists should take

### **Mitigating the Spread of Misinformation**



advantage of the willingness of patients to seek out dental information, by helping them access accurate, evidence-based information.

### ***Key take-away***

Research plays a pivotal role in the advancement of the dental hygiene profession. While many of dental hygienists will never actively conduct research studies, all dental hygienists need to understand basic research concepts and be proficient in searching for factual, scientific information on oral health. It is important not be swayed by data that may sound valid but has significant design flaws and biased interpretations of the findings. Moreover, as health care providers, dental hygienists should have the communication skills to share evidence-based information with patients and the public.

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