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The Power of Human Interactions

When was the last time you were asked about what you do for a living? Of course, anyone who has completed the rigors of the prerequisite coursework, followed by the demands of dental hygiene education, national board examinations, and the licensure process is proud to share that they are a registered dental hygienist! However, in my experience, this answer almost always gets a response something to the effect of “I am really bad about flossing” or “the last person who cleaned my teeth really hurt me,” and is usually accompanied by the person covering their mouth with their hands. You may also find that within the context of the conversation that the person has no idea regarding what the difference is between the doctor’s dental assistant and their dental hygienist. What if you were able to turn the direction of the conversation into focusing on the incredible role we can play in transforming the lives of the people we treat in our uniquely individual practice settings?

In order to change the conversation, we need to first change how we perceive ourselves. Do you see yourself as a “hygienist,” defined as a person who cleans teeth, or as an “oral health care professional”? As an oral health care professional, our focus should be on promoting health, particularly oral health, and preventing disease. As an oral health care professional, you are able to look at the whole person who has entrusted you to care for their oral health needs far beyond “cleaning their teeth.” As oral health care professionals, we are essential providers of comprehensive dental hygiene care extending far beyond the clinical aspects of removing soft and hard deposits from tooth surfaces. In fact, our “superpower”

lies in the collaborative partnerships that we build with our patients. As oral health care professionals, we have the unique opportunity to develop trust and rapport, while focusing on the needs of the person in our chair.

Motivational interviewing (MI), the focus of this special issue, is a powerful tool that can take you far beyond your routine advice giving (you need to brush better, floss more, rinse daily, etc.) to really focusing on the individual’s needs, thoughts, beliefs and intentions. Using MI provides you with a window into another person’s lived experiences to explore ways to support their health behavior changes. Developing MI skills can be the game changer! While respecting the unique needs and beliefs of the individual, MI can help the person clarify their strengths and identify their personal motivation for change. Person-centered communication can bring about the meaningful interactions that will lead to sustainable behavior change over time. As highlighted in this issue, the potential for oral and systemic health improvement using MI and brief MI, is vast with unlimited potential for growth.

As providers of oral health care, we take pride in our well-developed clinical skills, however the ability to support personal behavior changes leading to improved health and wellness, may be our most valuable skill.

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