

# A Canadian Hygienist in Turkey

by Wendy Taylor

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"Imagine a world with no hygienists..." This is a foreign concept for us as hygienists because then the prevention side of dentistry would surely be lacking. On the other hand, however, I am certain some of our patients would think it was great! No lectures, no scaling under local, no anxiety.

This was the situation I discovered when I arrived in Turkey a year ago and started my quest for employment as a dental hygienist. With 14 years of experience and a diploma from Dalhousie University, I thought, "This will be a breeze." However, after talking to a civilian dentist, I discovered that hygiene positions simply do not exist in dental offices. Furthermore, there isn't even a word in Turkish for dental hygienist. The closest approximation is *disciyim*, which roughly translates as "I do the dentistry of teeth."

Why was I in Turkey? Well, in February 2002, my husband (an officer in the Canadian Army) called me at work to ask if I would be interested in moving to an exotic and exciting foreign country. I of course said, "Sure, why not!" but then had to look at an atlas to see exactly where Turkey was.

I liked the fact that Turkey is considered part of the Eastern Mediterranean. However, during our first winter, we had a couple of snowstorms, one dumping about 20 centimetres of snow. Good thing I packed the snow shovel! It took a while to become familiar with the geography of the area as well as the varying climate.

With my high hopes of finding a job dashed, I accepted the only offer I got—as a volunteer at the local British International School giving presentations to the junior and senior high school students for their "Life Class." My 14 years' experience was as a dental hygienist and I found it

nerve-racking to stand in front of 33 teenagers one day and 42 the next. My knees were actually shaking.

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Approximately half the students at this school were Turkish, so I felt it best to explain what hygienists are, where they can be found, what plaque is and the destruction it can cause, as well as basic home care instruction. With the older students, I left an information sheet on how to contact ADHA and CDHA for additional information regarding hygiene as a career choice.

The school was in the process of organizing career information sessions/presentations for the most senior and graduating students. A person already working in a field would talk about their personal experiences in the area. This program has not started yet but I hope it will soon.

In order to maintain my "hands-on" skills, I contacted the chief medical officer at the NATO Military Headquarters where my husband is employed. My key interest was

in finding out whether there were any employment opportunities in the dental department of the combined military dental medical facility. Captain Ahmet Atalik (the head doctor) was very interested in having an "information-sharing" session between his medical/dental staffs and myself.

So keen was I to maintain my professional skills that I made an offer to Captain Ahmet to volunteer my time at Headquarters. We drew up a six-month Dental Hygiene Program/Proposal that was presented to, and approved by,

the Turkish Commander of the NATO Headquarters. We reached an unusual compromise. I would set up a program that would include not only the information-sharing sessions, but also a screening process for the officers and their families. This screening would encompass a hygiene maintenance program with detailed charting for everyone.

Captain Ahmet believed that a presentation on basic oral hygiene care at home and the most common issues of oral hygiene home care could be given to the Turkish Military personnel and their families. An invitation might also be extended to the international personnel and their families. In addition, Captain Ahmet and I both believed there might be an opportunity to address the civilian Turkish dentists. This presentation will likely be postponed until the fall of this year due to upcoming military activities. This delay is a good thing—I will have more time to prepare!

At present, I generally spend each Tuesday and Friday afternoon exchanging information on dental-related issues, as well as the differences/similarities between Canada and Turkey, with Captain Ali Layik and Lieutenant/Doctor Erhan. Doctor Erhan and I are also setting up the groundwork for the hygienist/dentist relationship with which we are all familiar by treating the oral health issues and concerns of the military personnel of both Turkey and the international community. We will also be treating their families in the near future. These afternoons are enlightening for me, in both the dental and lifestyles areas.

As a Canadian hygienist, I was interested in knowing what comprises the average diet in Turkey. This consists of meats (no pork), vegetables, fruits, grains, and dairy products. As Turkey is surrounded by the Black Sea, Sea of Marmara, Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean, fish is also a very important staple in the Turkish diet. To fully appreciate the variety of food items, I enrolled in a Turkish cookery course, an experience that can be summed up in one word—delicious!

There were seven other women in this Turkish cooking class and together we represented Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Canada. We became schooled in the making of mezes (appetizers), stuffed vegetables, and desserts made with mouthwatering sauces or syrups. This was a great opportunity to learn more about the Turkish diet, to see a new area of Istanbul, and to meet other members of the international community.

The kebab is an important and very common part of the Turkish diet. The most common type is the ground meat kebab that is normally served on flat bread with grilled vegetables, rice, and a yogurt sauce on the side. My favourite type of grilled meat is the “donor sandvic” (donor sandwich) made with chicken or beef grilled on an upright spit or skewer and then placed in a sandwich with French fries, choice of tomatoes, lettuce, onions or grilled vegetables. The small grilles or bufe with slowly turning spits are a common sight on the streets of Istanbul and outlying villages and towns.

Of course, no meal is complete without a dessert. My favourite is baklava, paper-thin pastry sheets that are brushed with butter and folded and then layered with ground pistachios or walnuts with syrup poured over it all.

To whip up any of these Turkish “delights,” you will need to make a pit stop at a local market. I generally visit a market or *pazar* every Tuesday and Thursday to purchase fresh fruit, vegetables, cheese, “knock off” clothing, pashminas, jewellery, and even everyday knick-knacks. I quickly learned to barter—asking the price, then offering about 50 per cent, hoping in the end to get about one-third off. I can only imagine the chaos that would ensue the first time if my husband started doing this at Canadian Tire back in Canada.

**I** learned some Turkish in order to get along in day-to-day life; English is not widely spoken. The Turkish language is a mixture of French, German, and Arabic influences and although I am taking language classes, it is still a challenge to get my message across. But I am practising and hope to improve!

Our next-door neighbours suggested that, in the first year, we concentrate on the “please’s” and “thank-you’s” and basics like numbers, colours, and how to ask for directions. I have a decent collection of words and phrases. My problem is trying to get the Turkish people to speak slowly enough to allow me to pick up those key words I need to comprehend the sentence.

Turkey is a fascinating place. Istanbul was not only the capital of three consecutive empires—Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman—but also was and is the gateway between two continents, Asia and Europe. With approximately 15 million people, it is a metropolitan city with a wealth of history stored in palaces, mosques, and numerous historical sites and monuments.

I recently visited the southwestern area of Turkey and the ancient city of Ephesus. Here, the early Christian evangelist Paul is believed to have preached in the Grand Theatre that can seat 24,000. Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus, was the goddess of prosperity, fertility, and the protection of nature. The Temple of Artemis within the city walls is believed to have been built in the fourth century BCE (before the common era) and is considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus was an impressive site, leaving me agog.

I will admit that the prospect of moving to Turkey was scary. As a woman, I had reservations about living in a Muslim country but these concerns quickly disappeared. I live in a cosmopolitan area of Turkey where it is common to see women dressed much like they would be in Canada, and enjoying many of the same social activities.

I find myself constantly amazed by the beauty and history of the land, the generosity of its people, and the vastness of its resources. I am one-third through my three-year stay in Turkey and have no regrets whatsoever about moving here. However, I am a Canadian at heart and when the time comes, I will be ready to move back home.

For those interested in helping to educate the Turkish dental professionals and the public on the importance of dental hygiene and its issues, contact me by e-mail at <nixontaylor@mailpuppy.com> or by regular mail at Yaprak Mah, 12 Caddesi 1 Sokak No. 21, 34450 Zekeriyakoy, Istanbul, Turkey. 🐶