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# Dental Hygiene Focus:

Preparing for the Silver Tsunami -  
Working with Senior Populations



## Connecting with Dementia Clients

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Recently I was invited by one of my clients to celebrate her 100th birthday. She is a vibrant senior who is one of an elite group of 6000 Canadians to reach this milestone.<sup>1</sup>

The number of Canadians over the age of 65 is projected to double from about five million in 2011 to about ten million by 2036. In 2011 approximately 15% had some degree of cognitive impairment, including dementia.<sup>1-4</sup>

Seniors need special attention for their dental care, and those with dementia need a unique and individualized approach.

For many dental hygienists, caring for seniors with dementia is unfamiliar territory and may be an uncomfortable experience. Your client is also living in this new territory and is experiencing fear. Learn to control your own anxieties and you can handle theirs.

### UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA

The first step is to recognize the stage of a client's dementia, which will help you to decide how best to approach him or her.

People with dementia may be unable to say if they are experiencing pain or discomfort. Refusing to eat, pulling at or continually touching their face, increased restlessness, erratic or aggressive behaviour are signs that you need to investigate the source of the problem. That investigation includes a dental assessment.<sup>5</sup>

The client's caregiver is a key source of information. Talk to the caregiver regarding any concerns, and encourage him or her to be present at all visits.<sup>6</sup>

### Early-Stage Dementia

In the early stage of dementia, clients will usually still be able to clean their own teeth. They may have to be reminded to carry out the task or they may need supervision. This is the time to address and fix any mouth issues because they are still able to handle the treatment with minimum assistance.<sup>7</sup>

### Middle-Stage Dementia

In the middle stage, clients may lose the ability to clean their teeth or lose interest in doing so, and caregivers may have to take over this task. The focus of dental treatment is likely to change from restorative to preventive care.<sup>7</sup>

### Advanced-Stage Dementia

In the advanced stage the client is likely to have significant cognitive impairment, possibly accompanied by complex medical conditions. You want to focus on the prevention of dental disease, keeping the client comfortable, and providing or referring for emergency treatment.<sup>7</sup>

### PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

Working with clients affected by dementia, I have learned some techniques that have helped to make the dental care visit a more favourable and pleasant experience.<sup>6</sup>



## ➤ Approach your client from the front

As dementia progresses, the field of vision decreases and hearing becomes more conical. Always talk to clients from directly in front as their vision is like a television screen that keeps decreasing in size as time progresses. Approaching them from behind can profoundly startle and agitate.

## ➤ Move slowly and calmly

## ➤ Smile and use a gentle touch

## ➤ Speak slowly and softly in short sentences

If you use long sentences, by the time you get to the end, your client will have forgotten the beginning.

## ➤ Sing to your clients

Often I sing my instructions, which makes clients laugh and open their mouth for me.<sup>8</sup>

## ➤ Use facial expressions

As much as 90 per cent of our communication takes place through non-verbal cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and touch.<sup>9</sup> Your clients often watch your face for visual clues of what you are trying to communicate, so whenever possible let them see the communication triangle formed by your eyes and mouth.

## ➤ Be aware of personal space

Clients with dementia can be very space sensitive so be aware as you work in an individual's intimate zone.<sup>10</sup>

## ➤ Offer guidance not choices

When talking to someone with dementia, rather than asking a yes or no question, offer guidance like: "Mrs. Jones, we are going to brush your teeth now."

## ➤ Avoid stressful situations

Be aware of situations in your surroundings that may cause stress to your client, such as

- » Unfamiliar territory, people, procedures, sounds, smells.
- » Physical pain, positioning, swallowing, hearing, vision, temperature, tiredness.
- » Mental confusion, disorientation, poor processing, hallucinations, paranoia.<sup>11</sup>

## SEE THE PERSON

The most important lesson that I have learned is to always remember that every person you see has an amazing life story that may sometimes be hidden behind the person facing you now.

I have learned to treat the person and not the condition. People with dementia are wonderful souls who require more attention to tap into what they cannot easily express. When you apply all of your clinical skills and add in extreme kindness you will have a positive experience with your very special client.

I hope that I will be invited to celebrate my client's 101st birthday next year.

*"People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

- Maya Angelou<sup>12</sup>

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