The publically recognized dental hygienist

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The value of the dental hygienist is yet to be fully recognized by the Canadian public. Our profession is almost fifty years old in Canada, and still many clients, friends, and family seem to be unclear of our role as a dental hygienist and health professional. Colleagues from other health professions themselves are often unsure of our role in healthcare. Is this the failure of our dental hygiene associations to promote the dental hygienist as a member of the healthcare team? Or is the curriculum for dental hygiene students’ void of self promotion skills so dental hygienists are not empowered to envision themselves in the bigger healthcare system? It could be that the problem originates from within, a perception of self that does not perceive us as a player in healthcare delivery. It could also be that the majority of the working environments of the dental hygienist are not conducive to recognizing the value of the dental hygienist in the healthcare system. In fifty years we have come a long way from the “girl in the office”; or have we? Irene Woodall, arguably the matriarch of the dental hygiene profession, said, …I learned that I could step out of the dental hygiene operatory, even beyond the teaching environment, and carry a message (right or wrong!). We haven’t done enough of that in dental hygiene. We tend to stick to the tried and true, the legally defined role, the safe approach to spreading information about ourselves and about proper oral care… But far too often we don’t take the risk or the opportunity to step out and proclaim who we are.1

Why do we need to proclaim who we are?

In order for the profession of dental hygiene to be a respected stakeholder in the future directions of healthcare in Canada, dental hygienists have to be first recognized by the greater public. What dental hygienists do, and the variety of settings in which dental hygienists provide services, must be common knowledge in Canadian households. The understanding that there is a need for the public to recognize the value of the dental hygienist is not new. As early as 1990, the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA) realized that in order for our profession to grow and be respected, the public has to be aware of the services dental hygienists provide. The CDHA strategic plan in 1990 had public awareness as their top priority.2 Twenty-two years later the CDHA recognizes that public recognition of the dental hygienist is still a top priority. Does this mean, historically, we have been ineffective in raising public awareness of the dental hygiene profession? I believe that this is partly true. There are a number of reasons that could explain our ineffectiveness in raising public awareness; traditional advertising is very expensive, our country is large and we do not have a sense of strong national unity as a profession. It is easy for dental hygienists to blame others for the relatively low profile of the dental hygienist within the healthcare system. However, I believe the real onus is on the dental hygienist to recognize our worth and how we fit into the big picture of healthcare.

Irene Woodall1 offered some rationale, in 1991, as to why dental hygienists are not in the public eye, “As a profession, we are not in the spotlight; we haven’t done anything exciting enough for the spotlight to find us; and we have not claimed the spotlight.”3 Twenty-one years later we still are not in the spotlight! How often do you see dental hygienists being interviewed on television or being included in advertisements for oral healthcare products? Toothbrush, toothpaste and fluoride rinse advertisements are endorsed by dentists; isn’t it time for dental hygienists to be endorsing products that we recommend on a daily basis? Irene Woodall was a true visionary; she advises us that stepping out of the operatory sometimes means sticking out one’s neck. If you don’t stick it out, the big breaks don’t happen. Saying “Yes, I can and I will” and then actually taking the step to shake up the status quo and to introduce new ideas could put us in the spotlight; it could help make us recognizable as an indispensable part of the oral care world; the public might even begin to describe us that way.4

How do we proclaim who we are?

It is a difficult task; I would suggest that successful proclamation of the Canadian dental hygienist requires supportive regulation and a personal affirmation of self worth. Almost every province in Canada now enjoys

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the benefits of self regulation; improved legislation potentiates improved public awareness because “the public will, hopefully, be able to directly access dental hygiene services, and dental hygienists themselves might increasingly recognize their importance as contributors in the healthcare system”.3 So now, with supportive regulation, we as dental hygienists are unleashed and poised to take the advice of Irene Woodall, step out and proclaim who we are!

But how do we step out? First, the desire must come from within, and second, dental hygienists must approach the delivery of oral care using a collaborative model of healthcare delivery, thereby, communicating with all health professionals in the best interests of the client. If this is so, the dental hygienist will no longer be perceived in society as an individual working for a dentist but as an independent provider of healthcare who collaborates with members of the dental profession as well as other health professions.4

So, be proud, be vocal, step out and proclaim who you are and what you do; it is time for us to help the public better understand and value the profession of dental hygiene in this country.

References