Celebrating 100 years of dental hygiene

How often do we get to celebrate a historical moment such as the 100th anniversary of dental hygiene? 2013 is truly a special year for those individuals who are dedicated to the prevention of oral disease. While gains have been made in some areas, there is still room for improving the oral and general health of the public.

What might the next 100 years hold for this profession? Just as there are new technologies to be heralded as presented in this publication, dental hygiene needs to continue to develop new ways of meeting the health needs of the public. Looking back, Alfred C. Fones conceptualized a hygienist as someone who would work in school systems to help children learn how to brush their teeth, reduce plaque and minimize oral disease. Looking ahead, we find ourselves wanting to reach beyond the classroom and the clinical operatory to an arena of settings that expand the concept of health homes.

Inter-professional or collaborative models of care may be the closest we can come to creating health homes for those in need. Being inclusive and capitalizing on the expertise of a group of health care professionals may help all providers bring the best to patient/client care. Working toward achieving health for individuals, families and communities can change the narrative about the health of America from one that's defined by worries about how to obtain health resources to one that reflects a commitment to improved health for all.

Remarkable as it may seem, the time arrived long ago when oral health professionals had to become advocates for health care by first capturing the interest of policymakers who neither fully understand nor feel the need to change the health care system. Despite the many reports that reflect the less than terrific health of the nation, if oral health care providers do not advocate for change, policymakers will not either.

To improve the oral health of the country, we need to look beyond today — far into the future. We must create an educational experience that changes the culture of dental hygiene science and practice. We must strive for creating and testing new models of health care, looking at outcomes as a means to an end. We must teach the dental hygienists of the future to be accountable for achieving prevention. To do that, hygienists will need to be flexible, alert for opportunities and willing to chart new territory.

When we get to 2113, let’s hope those looking back at us see us as the pioneers who were able to eradicate oral diseases — and enable the public to enjoy a lifetime of health.

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