Reflections on the ADHA meeting

By Patricia Walsh, RDH
Editor in Chief

I first met Esther Wilkins quite by accident. It was early in the morning and was a Chicago convention. Marginally awake after 12 hours of convention festivities the previous day, I walked onto a hotel elevator. No badge, no makeup, and in search of strong coffee. I glanced at the person I shared the lift with and did a double take. I tilted my head to one side and said, “Aren’t you...?” There she was, our Florence Nightingale. I was all alone with Dr. Wilkins for a whole glorious eight floors. The love we have for this hygienist is palpable. You see it at every book signing. We wish to hold her hand, feel her genuine warmth. Just being near her makes us feel as if we are somehow connected to the original intention and purity of our profession. One of the highlights of the American Dental Hygienists Association annual meeting was a morning speaker who opened with an unofficial “benediction” taken from “The Book of Esther.” About a thousand dental professionals got the joke immediately and burst into applause. When Dr. Wilkins spoke to us this year, not onstage, but via the Jumbotron screen, you could have heard a pin drop. She is the “true north” on our profession’s compass.

Technology sometimes leaves me scrambling to keep up. I would be lost without regular continuing education courses even if they weren’t a licensure requirement. This was not the case for the first 20 years of my career. But in more recent years, there has been an explosion of change in our profession. My office was one of the first in the state to go digital. Since then, the improvements that have been made with panorex clarify the rise. Additionally, research from the American Dental Association indicates the percentage of the population obtaining regular care has dropped and the frequency of dental visits has declined. No matter what challenges lie ahead, I know that we are more than capable to rise to the occasion as we always have. So, my fellow colleagues, I say we pause and reflect on this anniversary, to celebrate our profession and all that we have done. Have a party. Enjoy a piece of cake. But don’t rest for too long, because if we want to honor the mission that Dr. Fones set out for us 100 years ago, we still have a lot of work to do. Are you ready? Now let’s get started on another 100 Years of Dental Hygiene!}

References
1. www.nidcr.nih.gov/DataStatistics/FindDataByTopic/DentalCare/DentalCareChildren
identification is www.oral.org. A clinician can be guided along by answering simple questions about the abnormality. You’ll be asked to enter age, gender, borders, laceration, and location. The website will give you a list of the most probable or typical lesions that match your entries. I hope I never see evidence of metastatic breast cancer show up on one of my pans, but it’s entirely possible. The radiographic improvements that have transpired increase our responsibilities as clinicians. Technology has furthered our role as holistic health care providers.

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shorts, but my perpetually cold feet do appreciate the introduction of soft fur.)

Our professional meetings allow us to collaborate and compare. I no longer discount the blogs. Sometimes a grass-roots effort or product takes a little longer to catch on. A rumor might just have you hold off on buying a loupe if you know it may go cordless soon. Clinical trials and documentation can take years. Dental corporations compete with one another; dental publications compete with one another. The information highway can sometimes be a one-way, one-lane street. We use our education to take what we need for the time being, and leave the rest.

I try to tell my patients not to believe everything they read or see on TV. Not only are hygienists bombarded with professional information on a daily basis, it’s that much worse for the patient. The patient never reads peer-reviewed dental journals. I heard one well-educated lecturer disparagingly use the phrase “bogus journals” at a dental meeting. I think there’s a place at the table for everyone. Only a small percentage of us are in research — and writing our doctoral thesis.

The vast majority of hygienists just want to know what works and what doesn’t. Not necessarily what is fast and easy — but what actually works. We learn so much from each other’s clinical experiences in “the trenches.” There is an understanding in the military that if you really want to know what’s going on, ask a master sergeant. Don’t ask an officer. They’re too busy with the bureaucracy. Your doctor isn’t going to be up to date on which sensitivity toothpaste is the least abrasive. (Hint: It’s not the one you think.) He’s too busy trying to get his state income tax software to work properly. We, the hygienists, are the prevention specialists of the office.

The Oscar-winning actor Geena Davis spoke to us at the end of our ADHA session about a woman’s worth — the value of our integrity, the beauty of our intellect. Davis reminded us that we still have a long way to go to change how women as a whole are perceived. To change the Hollywood misrepresentation of women, she started the foundation called Seejane.org. I walked away from the convention hall feeling empowered and as tall as Davis in heels. She is an actor, not an actress; just as I am a hygienist, not a hygienistess.

As a profession, we were slow off the mark when it comes to diversity. I wonder sometimes if our female-oriented profession is both our greatest strength and our greatest weakness. We have evolved and diversified. I hope our individual information-gathering processes continue to evolve and diversify.

Some of us are astute to changes in technology and research, while others have ears to the ground via local meetings and the Internet. We go forward together in this new information age — free from information prejudice — with an open mind and a common goal.

The citizens’ memorial to Boston Marathon bombing victims is spread out across much of Boston’s Copley Square, five blocks from the convention center that hosted the June ADHA meeting. The still-growing memorial is adjacent to the marathon’s finish line, still painted on the pavement. Nearly a third of a block near the statue of painter John Singleton Copley is filled with running shoes, caps and other remembrances and gifts. Among the memorial’s most touching and recurring themes are the many references to the 8-year-old boy killed by one of the blasts. It’s reported that he made a poster in school at an earlier date that said “no more hurting people.” You see that written over and over again, along with “Boston Strong.” In juxtaposition with the square’s quiet area of reverence, life goes on. People are picnicking and children play on the grass. There are outdoor musicians entertaining and a farmers market is set up along the sidewalks.