The role of the hygienist in the 21st century

By Victoria Wilson, UK

Since the recent launch of the Emirates Dental Hygienists’ Club in the UAE, it could not be a more appropriate time to discuss the growing role of the hygienist in the twenty-first century. The prevalence of preventable dental disease within the region prevails, and the need for a focus on the core strategy to overcome such disease needs to be addressed.

The dental hygiene profession was founded over 100 years ago by Alfred Fones in the US for the promotion of oral health and prevention of disease. The fundamental ethical responsibility of the dental hygienist is the pursuit of the promotion and restoration of oral health. The dentist’s role certainly encompasses the promotion of oral health and prevention of disease in diagnosis and operative care, however, it is important to highlight that the main difference is that the scope of practice for a dentist is far greater than for a dental hygienist. It found further that a limited number of dentists are proactive about integrating hygienists into their practice model. This highlights the potential requirement to further incorporate dental hygiene into dentistry if the existing inequalities of oral health are to be overcome. This will require an extended workforce of dental hygienists, the expansion of educational facilities and further efforts towards including dental hygienists in existing practices in both public and private health care.

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In a recent survey carried out among dental professionals in the UAE, it became evident that a very small percentage of dentists actually work with dental hygienists. It found further that a limited number of dentists are proactive about integrating hygienists into their practice model. This highlights the potential requirement to further incorporate dental hygiene into dentistry if the existing inequalities of oral health are to be overcome. This will require an extended workforce of dental hygienists, the expansion of educational facilities and further efforts towards including dental hygienists in existing practices in both public and private health care.

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In a European report, it has been identified that the UK, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland are ranked as the healthiest in Europe in relation to the low prevalence of severe periodontal disease, supporting the need for the development and integration of the role of the dental hygienist. It has been proposed that advancing education in dental hygiene will achieve better oral and overall health for more people, by transforming the way dental hygiene graduates are prepared for the future to serve the health and wellness needs of society. Increasing clarity on the identity of the profession will affect how it is perceived by the public. In order to reach this point, every member of the dental team needs to be fully on board regarding the role of the dental hygienist and invest time in achieving the optimal success.

A global re-evaluation of requirements is needed to ensure that there is greater utilisation of hygienists in the provision of dental care with efficient and effective use of health care resources. Through evaluating the dental profession’s ability to provide care within the core skill sets, it is mandatory that the necessary steps be taken to ensure maximum effectiveness of an integrated dental and health care profession to optimise on reducing the prevalence of preventable dental disease.

It has been advised in a recent extensive report that future public health care policies will be orientated towards recommending behavioural support and adopting the common risk factor approach for oral health promotion.

Dental hygienists in public health care settings can positively affect patients by offering preventive care outreach services. Improvement in the quality of life for individuals was noted through improved health outcomes.

Victoria Wilson currently lives in Dubai working as a Dental Hygienist at Dr Roze & Associates Dental Clinic. She is also founder and president of the first official Dental Hygienists Organisation in the Middle East under the Emirates Medical Association and Dubai Dental Society. Wilson can be contacted at victoria@dradubai.com.

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