Dental Hygienists – Underutilized Primary Health Care Providers

Dental Hygienists are highly-trained primary health care providers who specialize in clinical therapy, oral health education and health promotion. A 2011 Australian study investigated the ability of a dental hygienist to undertake a dental hygiene examination for residents of aged care facilities, devise a periodontal and preventive treatment plan and refer patients appropriately to a dentist. The results demonstrated excellent agreement between the dentist and hygienists regarding the decision to refer residents to a dentist for treatment, with high sensitivity (99.6%) and specificity (82.9%). Only 8.0% of residents were referred by a hygienist to a dentist when the dentist considered that no referral was required.

In other words, dental hygienists have the skills and knowledge necessary to undertake a dental hygiene examination and correctly identify which clients require a referral to a dentist.

“I think we need to empower dental hygienists so that it’s clear that our work improves overall health. We can save the system money. Focusing on dental hygiene offers an affordable approach to health care. Affordability does not mean working for less, but rather it means providing regular services to patients which in turn can identify health problems at an earlier stage. Catching health issues earlier saves the system money and benefits the patient.” Sandie Ferguson, RDH

“It’s really important to build the image of dental hygienists as primary care providers. We’re in an ideal position to take on a greater role in primary care for several reasons, one being that people come to see us once or twice a year, generally more often than they may see their doctors. As dental hygienists it’s not our job to treat health issues that are not periodontal of course, but we can make the necessary referrals.” Jennifer Vandergaag, recent UBC DH program grad.

Dental hygienists are underutilized as primary health care providers, because the profession is limited by a regulation that indicates no British Columbian may visit a dental hygienist unless they have seen a dentist in the previous 365 days. This regulation needs to be reviewed, and a better system of referrals between dental hygienists and dentists needs to be considered, for the good of all British Columbians.

“Because it is well established that people tend to visit their oral care providers more often than they may see their physician, dentists were initially made part of the Rapid point of Care HIV Test project. However, over time it became clear that it was actually the dental hygienist who more often provided initial care and who were also trained to recognize and identify chronic health conditions.” Cherlyn Cortes, HIV Nurse Educator talking about the Rapid Point of Care HIV Test Project.

“Populations such as children, immigrants, First Nations, those with low income, seniors, and those with developmental disabilities face barriers to dental care in a traditional dental office setting. There are plenty of private practice dental offices that work well with these populations, but if there was more opportunity for dental hygienists to practice outside the walls of a dental practice, access to dental hygiene care could be greatly improved.” Brenda Morris, RDH

Ultimately, the goal of all health providers in British Columbia is to create healthier individuals and communities. Dental hygienists can play a significant role in this, if we can work in collaboration with all health care providers to develop a stronger oral healthcare system for the province – one that ensures patient safety, strong regulation and the best in patient care and referrals.

“Greater access to dental hygiene care would mean a healthier mouth and healthier individuals. In turn this would lead to healthier communities. Being able to provide oral care as members of a larger health care team is critical to the health of the population.” Brenda Morris, RDH