

4-1934

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Recommended Citation

McKinney, Alicia P. (1934) "The Dental Hygienist," *The Dentoscope*: Vol. 13: Iss. 11, Article 6.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/dentoscope/vol13/iss11/6>

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THE DENTAL HYGIENIST

By Alicia P. McKinney, D.H.

THE knowledge of hygiene and all methods of disease prevention, which are the result of years of scientific research, should not be considered the exclusive property of the medical, dental, or any other scientific profession which has not the greatest opportunity to spread health education for the benefit of this and succeeding generations.



ALICIA P. McKINNEY, D. H.

Experience has shown that health education can be carried out most efficiently by specially trained and educated teachers who are not closely associated with the treatment of disease.

It was for this type of service that the dental hygienist was created. Since the dental profession has been unable to give a sufficient amount of time to the all-important subject of mouth hygiene, a large number of women have been educated and trained as dental hygienists, that they may, in turn, go into such places as sanitariums, hospitals, public schools, dental offices, clinics, factories, and other private

corporations to care for the mouths of the great masses who are sorely in need of this type of education.

The dental hygienist is well-trained in prophylactic treatments, tooth brushing, food habits, and general hygiene. She can be of inestimable value in carrying out the educational and prophylactic service in a private practice, and through her frequent inspection of the patients' mouths may be utilized to co-operate with the dentist in all measures of disease prevention. With the realization that preventive measures applied to the mouths of children are most productive of the desired

results, the work of the dental hygienist may be especially effective in securing the interest and confidence of all patients.

The relation of pathological mouth conditions to systemic disease is now so definitely known that hospitals and sanitariums have established dental divisions for taking X-ray pictures, diagnosis, and sanitation of the mouths of patients. The sanitation of the mouth necessitates the service of dental hygienists who can operate at the bedside, if necessary. There is undoubtedly an educational value to this type of service which is far-reaching.

Since she is educated as a specialist in preventive dentistry, it becomes the duty of the dental hygienist to develop into the public mind a health consciousness. This can be done most effectively by beginning with the child in the pre-natal state, whose development, both physically and mentally, depends wholly on the mother. The hygienist must constantly bring to the attention of the mother the vital importance of a properly well-balanced diet and general care to insure the child's proper development. Through her contact with the hygienist, the mother begins to realize that, after her child comes into this world, it is mouth health that has much to do with its further development, and that, by the time the child reaches the age of three, it should then visit the dentist at least every six months for dental examination and care, thus avoiding the serious mistake of waiting until cavities have developed.

Next, one sees the hygienist with the child in public schools where the best results in preventive dentistry are obtained, for here it is the child learns that he must look after the growth and care of the teeth when he is young or else he will grow up with teeth so defective that no amount of later care will make them whole again.

Prevention, to be effective, must be applied early in the life of the individual and early in the life of the tooth. It is of first importance, therefore, that the hygienist in the public schools stimulate an interest in the child to form the habit of caring properly for the cleanliness of his teeth and understand the value of immediate attention to decay or defects in the teeth.

A right attitude of mind and pleasant associations are required to make the proper care of the mouth a habit of daily life.

It is only by giving the child a knowledge of his teeth and by making this care attractive and interesting that the hygienist can gain his confidence and secure the co-operation needed to establish regular preventive care of the mouth while it is in a healthy condition.

This knowledge is to help the children of our time to maintain

healthy bodies, clean mouths, and sound teeth. May these children, when grown to maturity, likewise, spread the gospel of prevention to the succeeding generations.

Without going into further detail as to the very broad field of the yet young profession of dental hygiene, one would readily understand why this profession is becoming day by day more and more valuable in the field of dentistry.

There are now courses in dental hygiene in most of the leading dental schools of the country. In order to give more women an opportunity to become well-trained for such a practical service, the Howard University College of Dentistry is completing plans for the institution of a course in dental hygiene to be given during the ensuing year. The objective of the course is to educate and train women in this special field that they may, in turn, go out and exercise their talents in caring for the mouths of the great masses; and, let the praises of their work be in the mouths of a grateful community.

To say that women are proud to be members of a profession which is doing and can do such valuable work would be an under-statement. The fact that they have chosen this field is in itself sufficient evidence.

And, may I conclude with this quotation, which is so applicable here: "To cure is the voice of the past, to prevent is the divine whisper of the future."