

Success Secrets of Seasoned Hygienists

Ginny Hegarty

So much has been written lately about hygienists who take their careers to the next level by starting their own companies, lecturing, and consulting. I applaud them for their vision and entrepreneurial spirit; they have created many new and exciting opportunities in the field of dental hygiene.

But, I began to wonder about the hygienist who chooses a long-term career in private practice. What keeps these professionals motivated and excited about hygiene? I recently had the pleasure of meeting with six seasoned hygienists to talk about their experiences and discover their secrets to success and their concerns for the profession. Their experiences span the past 48 years.

Carol Neff graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Hygiene School in 1954. She has been with her current practice in West Chester, Pa., for 28 years. Carol was inspired by her own hygienist in the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania and knew she wanted to practice hygiene from the time she was in seventh grade. "I loved it then and I still love it now." Carol laughed as she recalled the foot pump on her old dental chairs and her starting salary in 1954 of \$50 per week!

Kathleen Conahan is a graduate of the Temple University Hygiene School and has spent her entire 26-year career in the same practice in Thorndale, Pa. Kathy recalled that, "We were a dime a dozen when I graduated. There were 50 students in my graduating class and there weren't that many positions available. I started as a dental assistant doing hygiene as needed until I was able to practice hygiene full-time." Kathy still remembers her first treatment room, newly decorated with orange, yellow, and green-stripped wallpaper that was a great compliment to the bright orange countertops and dental chair! It's easy to wax sentimental from her state-of-the-art treatment room of today.

Corinne Dyas was in one of the first graduating classes at Montgomery County Community College in Pennsylvania. She is a 25-year veteran and has worked for a periodontist and a general practice. She currently practices in Norristown, Pa. She recalls, "I started out seeing a patient every 30 minutes when I first graduated hygiene school." Thankfully, that has changed. The biggest positive change Corinne notes is wearing gloves for every patient. She always wore a mask and glasses, and now can't believe that she treated patients without gloves.

Christine Bennett has practiced hygiene for 21 years. She received her dental hygiene degree from Temple University and a bachelor's degree in health education from Trenton State College in New Jersey. Christine loved going to visit her

hygienist as a child and decided she wanted to be a hygienist when she was 16 years old. Christine recalled her initial motivation for entering hygiene school. "I thought I was going to shine teeth for a living and it sounded like a really fun deal. The whole gum disease thing eluded me at first; I thought that would be an odd thing, as opposed to everybody having it." Christine is currently the trustee for the Montgomery/Bucks Dental Hygienists' Association and the chairperson for the Pennsylvania Academy of Dental Hygiene Studies, approving continuing education courses. She practices in West Chester, Pa.

What these women share is a dedication to their own personal happiness and their passion has led them to improve their own lives and their practices in the process.

Sherry Will is another Temple University graduate and has been practicing hygiene for 19 years. Sherry has been with her current practice in Exton, Pa., for the past 11 years. Sherry's first practice allowed a full hour for all adult patients; she recalls it was a great place to start out and master both her clinical skills and people skills. "I was really, really shy, but as I learned more about restorative care and options my confidence grew. I had a huge room when I first started practicing, but no real equipment beyond my handpiece. Now, my treatment room is smaller, but I have great equipment!"

Michelle Frederick received her degree in dental hygiene from Temple University and her bachelor's degree in public health from West Chester University in Pennsylvania. Michelle recalls a project in hygiene school that required her to intern in several practices and then write a report describing the "ideal practice." Michelle discovered her ideal practice in Thorndale, Pa., during that intern-

ship and has worked there for her entire 17-year career. According to Michelle, while she has worked in the same office her entire career, nothing else has stayed the same. Her practice is very progressive and there is always a seminar to attend and new equipment and procedures to learn.

Complacency and Disenchantment

Much has been written about professional burnout and disenchantment being epidemic among dental hygienists. I found this curious because I had no difficulty locating seasoned hygienists in my local area who were happy and fulfilled in their career choice. Was this disenchantment temporary in nature? Does everyone experience it and how can you work through it? In each of our discussions, I was most interested in learning if these women were currently happy and enthusiastic about their profession and, if so, how they stay motivated and excited about their hygiene careers. Had they experienced burnout, and how did they get past it?

Five of six of these professionals said that there had definitely been times when they questioned how long they would remain in hygiene practice. The most common causes for these feelings were consistently running behind schedule, inadequate time reserved for patients, divisiveness with coworkers, disagreement with the dentist's philosophy of practice, and physical discomforts, such as sore necks and backs.

The solution to burnout and complacency for each of these women started with one common thread. They accepted responsibility for their own happiness and sought out solutions. For some, the solution was to leave the source of the frustration and secure a position in a practice that was more suited to their own values and career goals. For others, it required patience and persistence to work with their dentists and coworkers to establish systems that supported their values and goals while also benefiting the rest of the team and the patients. For all of them, a new commitment to continuing education was an essential ingredient for professional fulfillment. When these hygienists found practices they could call home, the high levels of frustration quickly dissipated and their commitment to their careers and their patients strengthened.

The bottom line is that there are as many reasons for and solutions to burnout as there are hygienists because each situation is innately unique and very personal. I was looking for common threads to connect these hygienists and their experiences. Instead, I found that those who have found happiness and are fulfilled in their work were connected in spite of their differences.



Ginny Hegarty

Ginny founded her consulting practice in 1997 and specializes in increasing profitability through administrative organization and staff development. The hallmark of her 25-year career in dentistry is a record of consistently improving business performance. Ginny welcomes comments at 610-873-8404 or ginny@ginnyhegarty.com.

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References: 1. Data on file, Colgate Oral Pharmaceuticals, Inc. 2. Jagan A, et al. Reversal of primary root caries using dentifrices containing 5,000 and 1,100 ppm fluoride. *Caries Res*. 2001;35:41-46.

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I met hygienists who were working in both progressive and conservative dental practices. One practice is clearly high-tech and state-of-the-art while another has existed for years and conjures up Norman Rockwell images.

One practice had the latest diagnostic tools and high-tech equipment in each treatment room while another practice just replaced their belt-driven, slow-speed handpieces 3 years ago. While several practices had computers networked throughout the office and in the treatment rooms, a couple had systems confined to the front office. Two of the hygienists are paid on commission while the other four are paid hourly. So, clearly there were differences in their practices and their practice philosophies of care. What these women share is a dedication to their own personal happiness and their passion has led them to improve their own lives and their practices in the process.

Five Secrets to Professional Fulfillment

Here are the top five success secrets from my panel of seasoned hygienists:

1. Establish a rapport with the dentist built on shared philosophy, mutual respect, and trust. This includes respecting your schedule, helping you to stay on time, and supporting your efforts to be the best you can be.
2. Appreciation and recognition from the dentist both personally and in front of patients on a regular basis.
3. Time spent pursuing continuing education that includes restorative courses and practice management courses, as well as hygiene seminars.
4. Taking time off on a regular basis. This work is physically taxing; even a 3- or 4-day weekend can help you feel reenergized.
5. Challenging yourself to leave your comfort zone and learn something new.

Christine Bennett said it well: "I was with 1 practice for 11 years and another for 11 months. You know when it feels right and when it does not. You have to be honest with yourself and move on if it's not right."

Don't get me wrong, these women all admit they haven't found nirvana. "There have been moments when..." but these moments are few and far between the hygienist, the dentist, and the practice.

Conspicuously missing from this list is financial compensation. While the hygienists I interviewed agree that compensation is a motivator, they felt it is an empty reward without personal and professional satis-

Finally, A Little Bit Of Fun

The Best Excuses You've Heard for Not Flossing

- #5—"I don't have time." This is always said by patients who obviously have their hair colored and their nails done regularly!
- #4—"I don't have any floss." As if you can't buy it in every drugstore and grocery store in the country!
- #3—"It tastes bad and it's gross." It is gross, that's the point!
- #2—"My hands won't fit into my mouth." Only your fingers need to fit!
- #1—"Floss? Oh, I can't do that because it makes my gums bleed." Oh my! Here we go again....



faction. This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who has studied human nature, including Maslow's hierarchy of needs.¹ All human beings have very basic needs that must be met and each level builds on the next. These needs are:

- **Self-Actualization:** maximizing your potential
- **Esteem:** self-esteem and the recognition of others
- **Love:** acceptance of others
- **Safety:** stability and security
- **Physiological:** air, water, food, sleep.

The secrets to fulfillment that these hygienists have recognized are consistent with Maslow's list. Financial compensation fits into the fourth level of safety and security, and is toward the bottom of the list. Corinne Dyas commented that many people express interest in the field of dental hygiene because they can earn a good living after only 2 years of advanced education. She cautions, "Don't choose a career in dental hygiene for the money; you have to be happy to get up and go to work each day." Christine Bennett cautioned not to choose dental hygiene just for the money either or you'll be disappointed. "I have friends who also have bachelor's degrees and work in the corporate world earning two to four times the compensation I earn."

Reasons to Choose a Career in Dental Hygiene

There are many good reasons for choosing a career in dental hygiene. The top six reasons according to this group are:

1. **Flexibility:** to adjust your work schedule to life changes so you can balance work/family or work/school, etc.
2. **Financial compensation and job security:** you can always find work, even part time, and earn a good living.
3. **Helping people:** you build great

rapport with your patients and it feels good to know you are making a difference in patient's lives.

4. **Opportunities:** those available to you after a 2-year investment in college are great.

5. **You can leave your work at work:** there is no paperwork to take home.

6. **Instant gratification:** everyone looks better when they leave than when they came in.

The Best Advice These Hygienists Can Offer New Hygienists

- Finish your education right away; get your bachelor's degree. You never know what the future will hold and you should be prepared to take on new challenges and accept new opportunities.

- Join professional organizations and stay active.

- Build relationships with your coworkers. Effective teamwork is essential for everyone's success.

- Take courses to learn how to communicate effectively and build rapport with your patients. You'll be a much more effective hygienist.

Proven Methods of Motivating Patients

Michelle Frederick shared that the secret to successfully motivating patients toward improved oral health lies in the realization that every patient is unique. "You need to adjust your approach to the patient's personality." Christine Bennett agreed, saying that you will need to "get in some people's faces" to get results, especially when dealing with teenagers. "Humor helps a lot," Christine says. She also appeals to teenagers' desire to look good and gets great results when she tells her patients, "This isn't athlete's foot that you can hide in your shoes. We're talking about your face! Do you want your face to look like this?"



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Further text, possibly related to the success secrets.

Additional text, providing more information about the practice.

All of these hygienists agree that lecturing, nagging, and fear tactics will have the opposite of the desired effect. "Patients respond to your level of care and concern; always be encouraging," Carol Neff suggested. Kathy Conahan mentioned that many patients relate to the connection between the systemic effects of poor dental hygiene and their overall health. Corrine Dyas has noticed that health issues do prove to be effective motivators, as do personal issues, such as concerns about bad breath. Sherry Well added that the number of adult patients who really do not know how to brush effectively and appreciate being taught proper technique initially surprised her. "Don't overlook basic education when trying to motivate patients."

The solution to burnout and complacency...started with one common thread. They accepted responsibility for their own happiness and sought out solutions.

Greatest Advances in Dental Hygiene

This group of hygienists noted the following improvements and advances that have had great and positive effects in their practice of dental hygiene:

- sterilization protocols, especially consistently wearing gloves.
- instruments and ultrasonic tips are much thinner and better.
- recognition of the systemic effects of periodontal disease and the effects of its treatment, including adjunctive therapies and chemotherapeutic agents.
- technology, including the use of KaVo's DIAGNOdent®, ViziLite™ (Zila® Professional Pharmaceuticals) intraoral cameras, and digital radiography.
- methods for delivering fluoride treatment.

The Best Ways to Get the Dentist in to Check Your Patient

- The new walkie-talkies are the best. We all wear earpieces and can be in instant contact with each other. You can always get the dentist's

attention without waiting in line outside his treatment room.

- Talk with your dentist and agree on a philosophy of care that respects every patient's time and every provider's schedule. It takes a real commitment on everyone's part.
- Let your dentist know that he/she can interrupt you at their convenience to check the hygiene patient.

They don't have to wait until the end of the appointment.

- When all else fails, use the old standby: "Breathe down his or her neck!"

Biggest Frustration

Having only 45 minutes for an adult patient is very often challenging. A couple of these hygienists schedule a full hour for every adult

patient and love it. Most schedule 45 minutes and wish they had more time. Most felt the benefit of the extra time would pay for itself in the hygienist's ability to build relationships, thereby improving patient retention and allowing more time to discuss future needs and treatment options.

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Regrets

Several of the women mentioned that they regretted not taking a stand to secure retirement benefits for themselves. They feel that the benefits available in most dental practices are inadequate and that 401(k)s or some form of pension plan should be offered.

Legislation

Four of the six hygienists interviewed would like to see legislation changed to allow them to administer local anesthesia. This is currently prohibited in Pennsylvania.

Thoughts About the Future

Christine Bennett: "My concern is our scope of practice. There are

states where assistants with limited advanced education can scale teeth. Even if assistants are only allowed to clean above the gum line, the last time I checked gum disease happens below the gum line. Will the patient go to [a hygienist to] have their teeth cleaned a second time? I don't think so. Will they be charged less for the cleaning? I don't think so.

Will assistants be paid less than hygienists? Absolutely. I think this is a great disservice to the patients. I think we should all band together through professional organizations to protect our profession. Let's not go backwards again. Thirty years ago, hygienists in Pennsylvania were able to give local anesthesia. Now we can't."

Carol Neff: "I think the concept of independent dental hygiene practice is destructive and would fragment dentistry. I can't imagine many hygienists want to deal with all the business issues involved in managing a practice; it would distract you from patient care. I also share Christine's concern about unlicensed staff cleaning teeth."

Kathy Conahan: "I get on my soap box when I have patients come in with heart problems who haven't been told by their physicians about the need to see their dentist. We have all this information connecting dental health with overall health. We need to get the medical establishment up to snuff. We are very aware of the connection, but they don't seem to be. For instance, diabetes will be much more manageable if the gum tissue is healthy; if diabetic patients have active periodontal disease, it will definitely raise their blood sugar levels. We always ask our patients, 'When was the last time you saw your physician?' How many physicians ask, 'When is the last time you had your teeth cleaned?' or, 'When was the last time you saw your dentist?'"

Michelle Frederick: "I take an active role in the effectiveness and profitability of the hygiene department in our practice. It motivates me to see the big picture and gives me such a great sense of self-satisfaction, ownership, and control over my own destiny. I am paid strictly on commission. I feel better about my work and found that this new sense of ownership eliminates complacency and forces me to be more in tune with my patients, my schedule, and the overall practice. I don't just go through the hygiene motions. This independence also improves teamwork and makes every day exciting. I would recommend this to my colleagues and can't imagine ever going back to being an hourly employee." **COH**

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Reference

- 1 Maslow A. *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed, Harper & Row; 1970.