

What You Didn't Learn in Hygiene School

By Ginny Hegarty

I recently had the pleasure of meeting with 5 hygienists who have been practicing anywhere from 3 to 6 years (Sidebar). This is the story of their transition from hygiene school to hygiene practice. We discussed their challenges, lessons learned the hard way, concerns for the future, and advice for new graduates.

The Real World

My panel of hygienists unanimously agreed that they felt they had strong clinical skills when they entered hygiene practice. Their school schedules had been rigorous and their instructors had been demanding to assure their clinical competence. But real-world hygiene is about much more than clinical competence, and the reality is that there are many different job descriptions that fall under the heading of dental hygienist in your local paper. The opportunities are varied, and having a clear understanding of your own preferred job description will make the process much easier. There is also the reality of life after hygiene school to contend with. Hygiene school was a very protected and controlled environment, providing a sense of comfort that comes from knowing the rules, having a predictable routine to follow in class or clinic, and having your classmates for support.

It's scary to suddenly find yourself alone and on your own after having been sheltered like that. It's a good thing that you have clinical competence because your clinical skills are the only thing you probably feel sure about as you enter the real world. You will be working in a new environment with new equipment, new rules, and new people. This panel of hygienists recommends that you spend all the time you need interviewing for the right opportunity. Don't feel the need to settle for less than what feels right to you, nor should you settle just for a paycheck. It's far better to find a practice that is a good fit, even if it takes a little while, than to settle, become disillusioned, and start your job search all over again.

Looking for Your First Job

It was interesting to learn what was most important to these new graduates when they interviewed for their first positions. Initially, everyone was concerned with compensation issues; they quickly learned that there were other equal or more important issues. After having survived the interview process and, in some cases, their first few positions, the majority in this panel listed great relationships

and opportunities to learn and grow as their 2 highest priorities when looking for a practice.

Sara Lymberis told me that her top 3 questions when looking for her first job were about hours, pay, and benefits. She would soon learn that there were more important questions to ask—the dentist's philosophy of care, the percentage of current advanced hygiene services, and the dentist's level of commitment to continuing education and progressive treatment alternatives. She feels that it is imperative that you know who you will be working with and have the opportunity to meet and speak with the other hygienists and the rest of the staff.

Sara says, "I developed close relationships with my patients in hygiene school, and I knew that it was these great relationships that would make hygiene rewarding for me. In one of my first practices, I was able to create great rapport with the patients. In the second practice, I felt the dentist was neglectful and was too willing to watch conditions that I felt needed attention. I was uncomfortable discussing needs without the dentist's support, and you can't develop relationships under those conditions."

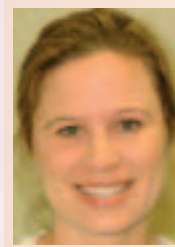
Sara knew right away that things were going to be very different when she began working in her current practice. Her first month was spent shadowing 2 of the other hygienists in the practice so she could learn both the hygiene protocol for the office and how her colleagues interacted with patients. After her hygiene rotation, she spent time with the dentist and the clinical assistants to learn the dentist's philosophy of care and preferred restorative materials, and she learned the practice's technology. Sara then completed her orientation by working with the administrative staff to learn the computer system, the recare system, scheduling guidelines, and telephone protocol. Sara was a fully functioning member of the team by the time she saw her first hygiene patient. Sara's advice to new graduates is to "take your time when interviewing; don't jump at the first

offer. You can always make money, but if you want to be happy and grow in your profession, take the time to learn the dentist's philosophy."



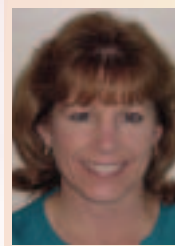
Stacey DeKrane

graduated from the Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport, PA, with an associate's degree in applied sciences. Stacey chose hygiene on the recommendation of a family friend. Stacey also had a very strong relationship with her own hygienist while growing up. She currently works with a practice in Exton, PA.



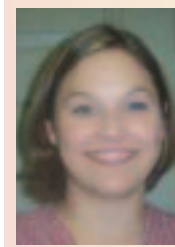
Sara Lymberis

received her bachelor's degree in applied science from West Virginia University. Sara knew she wanted a career in health care and was positively influenced by her own hygienist. Sara says, "She always made going to the dentist fun." She currently works with a practice in Thorndale, PA.



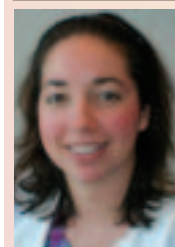
Eileen Moles

graduated from Camden County Community College in New Jersey with an associate's degree in applied sciences. Eileen had previously earned a bachelor's degree in business administration and an MBA in finance, then worked in the corporate world for awhile before deciding to pursue a career in dental hygiene. Eileen works 3 days a week in a Philadelphia practice and 1 day each in practices in Moorestown, NJ and Medford, NJ.



Amie Thomas

received her bachelor's degree in allied health, science, and dental hygiene from the Medical College of Georgia (MCG). Amie felt that the program at MCG was very thorough and it was a great advantage to share the clinic with the dental students. Amie currently works for 2 practices in Augusta, GA.



Shannon Zynn

graduated from Harcum College in Bryn Mawr, PA, with an associate's degree in allied health and science. She will continue pursuing her bachelor's degree through independent study while working full-time. Shannon knew she wanted to pursue a career with a science major and a family friend recommended hygiene. Shannon currently works with Sara Lymberis at the same practice in Thorndale, PA.



Ginny Hegarty

Ginny is a practice management consultant specializing in helping dental practices build momentum to reach their potential. Ginny conducts in-office practice assessments and consultations that focus on improving profitability through practice organization and staff development. She welcomes comments at (610) 873-8404 or ginny@ginnyhegarty.com.

What You Didn't Learn in Hygiene School

Amie Thomas asked about compensation first and how many days a week the practices were offering second. Amie accepted 2 different part-time positions and said, *"I was so glad I did 2 separate practices to begin with because I didn't realize how truly unique 2 different places could be. I realized that school can't really teach you about dealing with people."*

Amie worked with 2 other hygienists in 1 practice, but needed to work independently to move toward more thorough care and patient education and to build greater patient relations. In a second position, Amie was the only hygienist on staff, so she was able to create her ideal hygiene program and protocols and incorporate the Clinically Advanced Education System (CAESY) into her practice. The dentist shared Amie's progressive philosophy, and the entire team worked together to take their practice to a higher level. They created a highly successful practice, but something changed along the way. They no longer had the great camaraderie that brought them together in the first place. There was no time for staff meetings or performance reviews, and they lost their personal connections with the rest of the team. Amie felt it was time for a change and decided to leave the practice.

When interviewing for her current position, Amie asked about the dentist's philosophy of care and wanted to know how long the staff members had been there. Amie feels that it's the interpersonal relationships that can determine your personal happiness. She says, *"I didn't want to continue to come home from work unhappy. It was affecting my personal life."* Her advice to colleagues when interviewing is to realize *"you can investigate behind the scenes. Go to your society meetings and discover the network you can tap into."*

Stacey DeKrane chose to work with a placement agency and temped for the first year so that she could evaluate the different types of practices. During that year, Stacey realized that her biggest challenge was going to be finding a practice that was a good fit. She recommends temping as a great way to *"see what it's really like out there."*

Eileen Moles's experiences helped her discover 1 dentist's philosophy that introduced her to the continuing education and progressive treatment options she could use to take her work to the next level. She sees her

role now as a periodontal therapist incorporating technology, medications, and alternate approaches to treatment to better serve her patients. She incorporates intraoral and digital x-rays, bleaching, computer scheduling, and treatment planning into her day.

Shannon Zynn asked standard questions when first interviewing and

also considered location when accepting her first position. She quickly realized that she needed to move on from her first position because she was not being challenged. Shannon enjoyed working with the cutting-edge technology she experienced in school and found that working without it seriously affected enjoyment of her work. She

is now very happy and challenged in her current position, where she incorporates CAESY with digital and intraoral cameras, teeth whitening technology, laser technology to detect caries, short arc xenon or deuterium flashlights, voice-activated perio charting, and the use of chemotherapeutic agents.

This group of hygienists quickly

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realized that learning how to achieve happiness and success in their hygiene careers was a lesson that began *after* graduation. Eileen remembers the most challenging aspect of those first days was learning the dentist's philosophy so that she knew how to respond to patients' questions regarding restorative recommendations.

Shannon and Stacey both remember being more than a little intimidated when first on their own. They both felt that they had complete clinical competence, but knew that they had no prior experience with "the big picture." Patients had questions regarding treatment options and insurance benefits that they were unprepared to answer. While they knew what they wanted to teach patients, they also realized that they didn't have the communication skills to effectively reach out to all types of patients. Clearly, the lessons don't end when school is over; continued success will require a dedication to continuing education, including how to work as part of a team.

Creating Success

It is astonishing to realize that once hired, most new hygienists immediately begin seeing patients without the benefit of any formal training and orientation period. Dentists should realize that not only is this unfair to the hygienists, but also to the patients, the practice, and even themselves. Providing the opportunity for

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the new hire to learn the practice's philosophy, verbiage, protocol, and style lets the patient, practice, and practitioners all win. Sara's experience is the ideal scenario. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all practices adopted

a similar philosophy for welcoming new staff members? I think it would become commonplace if dentists realized the amazing effect this type of orientation could have on their hygienists' overall effectiveness by cutting short the learning curve and increasing overall awareness. No, not every practice would give you a month to rotate through the different

departments in the practice, but wouldn't any amount of time be an improvement on the trial-and-error approach currently practiced in most offices? Discussing the details of a practice's training and orientation program during the interview process could provide great insight into the practice.

Every practice needs a thriving hygiene department to attain and sustain their desired levels of success. So, what constitutes a successful hygiene department? My experience has shown that it's generally accepted that hygiene services should represent approximately 25% to 35% of all practice revenue, hygiene compensation should consist of approximately 30% to 33% of hygiene production, and periodontal services should make up approximately 25% to 35% of all hygiene services rendered. Inquiring about the mix of hygiene services during an interview will paint a picture of your typical day in that practice. If you prefer a varied schedule that challenges you in many aspects of treatment, you won't be happy spending all of your time performing routine prophylaxis.

Several of the hygienists I interviewed decided that success means having the freedom to take an active role in their patients' overall care with their dentist's full support. As you develop relationships with your patients, you become a trusted member of each patient's health care family. You can provide a valuable second opinion regarding treatment options and should keep up-to-date on restorative options. Hygienists are becoming an invaluable link between

their patients and their patients' physician and are redefining what it takes to be successful.

Dentistry is not just a health care practice, it's also a health care business. The successful hygienist must also realize his or her role in the profitability of the practice. Sara and Shannon report taking active roles within their practices to control patient retention and to manage the continuing care program. Four of the 5 women who I interviewed manage their own schedules and feel that this gives them better control over the effectiveness of their schedules and allows them greater influence in achieving patient cooperation and compliance regarding intervals between recare appointments.

Compensation

Compensation is another hot topic. Most hygienists are paid an hourly or daily rate. A growing trend in the field is to pay hygienists on commission, similar to the way associate dentists are paid. One member of this panel is paid that way. Sara remembers being a little scared about it when she first agreed, but now she can't imagine going back to being paid as an hourly employee. She says, "It makes you more motivated. I feel differently about my work and I feel like I have created my own practice within a practice."

I had the opportunity to speak with Rich DeForno, DDS, Thorndale, PA, who pays 3 of his 4 hygienists on commission. Rich feels that commission-based pay offers hygienists "more recognition for their value to the practice." He feels it's important for them to be compensated for their efforts and it also creates a less stressful relationship for him. He says, "I'm no longer constantly and chronically worried about open slots in the hygiene schedules." Rich cautions that this arrangement will only work with hygienists who value excellence in dentistry and are very concerned about their patients.

Mentoring

The hygienists I spoke with have enjoyed a very rewarding mentoring relationship with other hygienists who work in their practices. Stacey and Shannon both agree that their peers have been very helpful in sharing methods for communicating with and motivating patients. In return, these newer hygienists are able to share the latest technologies, pharmacology advances, and treatment

methods with their senior colleagues. Finding mentors in your practice, in a study club, or in a professional organization can give you back some of the camaraderie you had in hygiene school, enhance your enjoyment of your work, and help you through trying times.

Is Burnout in Your Future?

There's a lot of talk of burnout after practicing hygiene for a few years, but this isn't unique to hygiene. Anything you do on a daily basis will lead to dissatisfaction and burnout. The key to avoiding boredom in your work is to discover your passion and nourish it. Amie admits she was becoming bored with her work, but was able to refocus her efforts and concentrate on the things that make hygiene exciting for her. Amie says, "*The technology and new things keep me happy. Now I feel like I know how to avoid burnout.*" Eileen feels that "*the people, the flexibility, the autonomy, and the technology*" will keep her happy. And, at this point in her career, Stacey believes that burnout is generally "*more about the practice you are in than the work you are doing. It's most important that you 'click' with the people you are working with.*"

Concerns and Challenges

The main concern this group mentioned was preceptorship. They feel it's important to be active in professional organizations to make sure that their futures are secure. More than 1 of these women mentioned the importance of having a 4-year degree and a backup plan. Several of the women would like to be able to focus their efforts within 1 practice. For some hygienists, it remains difficult in some areas to find a full-time opportunity. Other hygienists reported that when they had children and wanted to cut back their hours, they found the flexibility they desired and are very happy with part-time positions.

Conclusion

Real-world experience teaches that there is a big difference between making a *living* as a dental hygienist and making a *life* as one. It was obvious to me that the women who were able to provide the most varied mix of services to their patients were the ones who were the most engaged and enthusiastic about dental hygiene. It makes perfect sense that it would be much more exciting and interesting to manage a schedule that includes

adult hygiene, periodontal therapy, adjunctive therapies, placement of medicaments, whitening, pediatric patients, and sealants than it would be to see one recare patient after another all day.

There are definitely lessons to be learned after graduation. The most important lesson learned involved realizing that money alone will not

make you happy in your career. Granted, the lure of dental hygiene initially is the ability to join the health care field after just 2 years of further education and earn a good living with flexible working hours and conditions. But, if you continue to discover what really challenges and excites you in this profession, you will discover a truly rewarding

and exciting career. Reggie Leach, the famous NHL hockey player, said it well, "Success is not the result of spontaneous combustion; you have to set yourself on fire." **COH**