

## Happy New Year: Celebrate the 'D' Word!

This past fall the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) released a position paper titled "Dental Hygiene Diagnosis." Gasp, shock, amazement...dental hygienists are allowed to diagnose?! How many of us have tiptoed through our careers avoiding the 'D' word in favor of terms that don't quite carry the same fear of diagnosis and the implied dental hygiene independence? Terms like *assessment*, *examination*, and *charting* have never truly expressed what dental hygienists have long been educated to do—diagnosis oral conditions relating to health and disease. While many of us have always realized this and turned a blind eye preferring to placate vs. correct the oversight, perhaps it is time to refocus on the 'D' word and the opportunities it represents for the profession and clients alike.

The position paper is presented in its entirety for your review on the following page.

### Diagnosis Responsibility

While many dental hygienists have always established dental hygiene diagnosis and treatment plans, this paper outlines our opportunity to bring the process into mainstream practice. Each chart entry should include the dental hygiene diagnosis and associated treatment strategies. Diagnostics for dental hygiene will have a unique focus in that recommended strategies to maintain *overall health* also will be included.

In a press release from the ADHA,<sup>1</sup> current President Katie L. Dawson, RDH, BS, comments that "[The] ADHA is releasing this significant position paper to acknowledge dental hygiene diagnosis as a key responsibility of the profession of dental hygiene. [The] ADHA wants to ensure the public that their visit to the dental hygienist includes a high standard for preventive services from a highly qualified oral health care professional."

"ADHA has made crucial steps forward on behalf of the dental hygiene profession in recent years, such as the development of the advanced dental hygiene practitioner who will provide diagnostic, preventive, restorative, and therapeutic services directly to the public," said Dawson. "This position paper continues this ongoing effort to move the profession forward and bring appropriate recognition to the important service dental hygienists provide to the public."

Our professional organization has stated our obligation



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and responsibility to consumers as it relates to comprehensive oral health care. In addition, this paper has paved the way for establishing diagnosis as an ethical, professional, and legal part of dental hygiene care.

### Celebrating the 'D' Word

For years using the term *diagnosis* in association with services rendered by a dental hygienist has had a negative connotation and yet it describes the very essence of dental hygiene practice. This archaic point of view is outdated and diminishes the professional role of the dental hygienist. It has been used as a means to assure the physical presence and involvement of our dentist counterparts.

As the need for preventive services grows and underserved populations balloon, the reality of a dentist being physically present is nearly impossible and is a disservice to patients. As outlined by many legislative efforts across the nation, which include the expansion of scope of practice and the relaxing of supervision of dental hygienists, our expertise in the diagnostic phase is essential.

Celebrate the 'D' word. Include your diagnosis in every chart. Define what your diagnostic method will include. Proactively educate fellow dental team members and patients who may not understand or appreciate the diagnostic role you play. Endeavor to have the term included in your states' practice act as a part of your professional licensure. You have always provided the best in quality oral health care, so call it what it is—the dental hygiene diagnosis! **COH**

### References

1. The American Dental Hygienists' Association Releases Position Paper Formally Recognizing Dental Hygiene Diagnosis by a Dental Hygienist. ADHA Press Release, September 26, 2005. Available at: [http://adha.org/media/releases/09262005\\_diagnosis%20htm.htm](http://adha.org/media/releases/09262005_diagnosis%20htm.htm). Accessed Nov 29, 2005.
2. American Dental Hygienists' Association Dental Hygiene Diagnosis Position Paper, June 2005. Available at: [http://adha.org/downloads/DHDx\\_position\\_paper.pdf](http://adha.org/downloads/DHDx_position_paper.pdf). Accessed Nov 29, 2005.

## **American Dental Hygienists' Association Dental Hygiene Diagnosis Position Paper<sup>2</sup>**

The dental hygiene diagnosis provides the foundation for the development, implementation, and evaluation of the dental hygiene treatment plan. In order to provide comprehensive quality oral health care, it is the professional obligation of dental hygienists to formulate a dental hygiene diagnosis.

### **Purpose**

The American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) recognizes that the dental hygiene process of care includes assessment, diagnosis, planning, implementation, and evaluation.<sup>1</sup> Further, ADHA supports educational curricula that lead to competency in the dental hygiene process of care.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the position of ADHA is that dental hygienists, by virtue of graduation from an accredited dental hygiene program, are educationally prepared to conduct a dental hygiene diagnosis and that the formulation of a dental hygiene diagnosis is the responsibility of the dental hygienist in the delivery of quality oral health care.

### **Definitions**

Diagnosis has been defined as "an analysis of the cause and nature of a problem or situation, or a statement of its solution." Diagnosis is considered a generic term describing a process used by many professions and should not be considered the domain of any one health profession. A variety of diagnostic models have been proposed by medicine, dentistry, and nursing. Medical and dental diagnostic models tend to focus on the diagnosis of systemic diseases and dental pathology, respectively. Nursing models differ from medical and dental diagnostic models in that the nursing model expands the focus of diagnosis from a disease orientation to an emphasis on the overall health function of individuals and groups.

Dental hygiene diagnostic models tend to follow nursing diagnostic models by further focusing on the overall health of the patient/client. Widely recognized dental hygiene experts and textbook authors have formally developed theory, models, and definitions for the dental hygiene diagnosis. Darby and Walsh defined the dental hygiene diagnosis using a human need theory as "the identification of a client's human need deficit related to dental hygiene care. A professional dental hygiene diagnosis is a clinical diagnosis made by a dental hygienist that identifies an actual or potential human need deficit related to oral health or disease that the dental hygienist is educated and licensed to treat."<sup>3</sup>

Mueller-Joseph and Peterson propose a two-step dental hygiene diagnosis model based on an earlier nursing model that includes data processing and diagnosis formulation.<sup>4</sup> The Mueller-Joseph and Peterson model uses a dental hygiene diagnostic statement that forms the foundation from which the plan of care is designed, implemented, and evaluated.

Wilkins defines the dental hygiene diagnosis as "the identification of an existing or potential oral health problem that a dental hygienist is qualified and licensed to treat."<sup>5</sup>

### **Supporting Evidence**

The Accreditation Standards for Dental Hygiene Education Programs as approved by the American Dental Association Commission on Dental Accreditation (ADA CDA) also recognize the dental hygiene process of care which includes the dental hygiene diagnosis in Standard 2-19.<sup>6</sup>

### **Standard 2-19 Excerpt:**

Standard 2-19 Graduates must be competent in providing the dental hygiene process of care, which includes:

Planning—the establishment of realistic goals and treatment strategies to facilitate optimal oral health

- a. dental hygiene diagnosis
- b. dental hygiene treatment plan
- c. informed consent
- d. dental hygiene case presentation.

The American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Competencies for Entry into the Profession of Dental Hygiene describe the abilities expected of a dental hygienist entering the profession.<sup>7</sup> The ADEA competencies include the dental hygiene diagnosis within the patient/client care competencies, which defines dental hygiene diagnosis as "the use of critical decision making skills to reach conclusions about the patient's/client's dental hygiene needs based on all available assessment data."

### **Conclusion**

The formulation of the dental hygiene diagnosis is a vital component of the dental hygiene process of care. Dental hygienists practicing collaboratively with patients/clients and other professional members of interdisciplinary health care teams are prepared to analyze and synthesize patient assessment data as part of the diagnostic process. The dental hygiene diagnosis provides the foundation for the development, implementation, and evaluation of the dental hygiene treatment plan. In order to provide comprehensive quality oral health care, it is the professional obligation of dental hygienists to formulate a dental hygiene diagnosis.

### **References**

1. American Dental Hygienists' Association. Policy 18-96 Glossary; 1996.
2. American Dental Hygienists' Association. Policy 16-93 Education; 1993.
3. Darby M, Walsh M. *Dental Hygiene Theory and Practice*. 2nd ed. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2003.
4. Mueller-Joseph L, Peterson M. *Dental Hygiene Process: Diagnosis and Care Planning*. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers; 1995.
5. Wilkins E. *Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist*. 7th ed. Malvern, PA: Williams & Wilkins; 1994.
6. American Dental Association Commission on Dental Accreditation. Accreditation standards for dental hygiene education programs. Chicago, IL: American Dental Association; 1998.
7. American Dental Education Association. Exhibit 7: competencies for entry into the profession of dental hygiene. *J Dent Educ*. 2004;68:745-749.