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# EMPOWER

**Broaden the efficiency and effectiveness of the dental practice by empowering dental hygienists**



New technologies help us improve dental practice efficiency and effectiveness by expanding the scope of treatments that empowered dental hygienists can provide to their patients.

Several considerations need to be addressed when one talks about empowering dental hygienists. First, consider regulatory or scope-of-practice issues when reviewing which products or techniques to implement into the practice. State regulations and practice acts define the duties dental hygienists are allowed to legally perform.

### Anesthetic

For example, in more than 30 states, hygienists are permitted to perform local anesthesia. This actually benefits the practice, because the dentist doesn't need to leave the patient she is treating to anesthetize the dental hygiene patient. Also, if the patient is apprehensive and metabolizes the anesthetic, which may warrant the need for reinjection, the dentist will not have to continually leave

her current patient to administer more anesthetic. It is advantageous for the time management of the entire team to have a hygienist who is skilled in anesthetic administration.

The concern in some states that do not currently allow dental hygienists to perform local anesthesia is that this change in the practice act would somehow enable hygienists to "come in the back door" ... to gradually gain the power to perform dental procedures currently only the dentist performs, without obtaining the extensive education required of a dentist.

Two very separate issues must be considered here; they truly do not overlap. Hygienists are educated and licensed to administer local anesthetics in many states. They typically

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receive similar training for local anesthetic as dentists receive. By prohibiting hygienists from providing the therapy that many are licensed and educated to perform, states are perhaps keeping dentists from running their practices at peak time-management efficiency. In the previous example, if anesthetic is metabolized quickly, the patient will suffer, the hygienist's workflow will be interrupted, and the doctor will be forced to attend to a hygiene procedure that could easily be delegated to the hygienist, thus freeing up productive time.

### Lasers

There appear to be discrepancies in state laws regarding the use of lasers. Dental hygienists are often trained to use lasers for specific procedures, such as periodontal therapy and whitening. They are also permitted to place restorations in some states, while in others, assistants who are not licensed and trained in other areas of dental care are allowed to place restorative materials.

### The onset of technology

With these emerging and maturing technologies, it makes sense for hygienists to perform specific tasks for which they are licensed and educated to perform. The hygienist is empowered, which increases value for the dentist. With experience, the more dental hygienists who are empowered, the better and more efficiently the dental practice can run, and therefore, the more successful the dental practice will become.

A variety of products are available which empower the hygienist. Digital radiography is, of course, an indispensable tool for the contemporary dental practice, and one which may very well be empowering for hygienists. In most cases, hygienists can take radiographs under the supervision of the dentist, although how supervision is delegated or defined varies from state to state, and often from practice to practice.

Digital radiography technology — like DEXIS<sup>®</sup>, Gendex, Shick, and Suni technologies — enables the clinician or dental hygienist to use systems so that X-rays may be automatically mounted in the way the dentist wants to view them. This does not necessarily require the hygienist to go back to a computer keyboard after a radiograph is captured. By using advanced diagnostic capabilities, the hygienist is able to become a partner in the assessment/diagnostic process.

The acronym QLF stands for Qualitative

Light-Induced Fluorescence. QLF, by Omnii Oral Pharmaceuticals, is an instrument that actually lights up the tooth, making the tooth structure appear blue, while bacteria appears red. A picture can be taken of the imaged tooth and appropriate therapy recommended. After the recommended period of treatment, the patient returns to have the tooth remapped to determine if the tooth has remineralized and to decide on additional preventive/therapeutic/restorative therapy.

KaVo's DIAGNOdent is a laser unit that is directly applied to the tooth for the early detection of very small lesions. When the user scans the tooth with this instrument, it identifies areas that may need preventive or restorative treatment. Once the numbers are interpreted, these identified areas can be treated appropriately.

Profin, by Dentatus, is a technology that facilitates the removal of excess composite or amalgam that may have been placed incorrectly. It enables the clinician, again depending on specific state regulations, to correct problems with placement and to eliminate irritation and possible periodontal problems. This is yet another technology that can be very empowering to dental hygienists.

The dental community can recognize that we empower hygienists by supporting continuing education and the total utilization of their skills. Empowering hygienists means that we can expand the scope of our practices by including new technologies that hygienists may be qualified to use. Until that realization translates into laws which broaden the scope of procedures hygienists are licensed to perform, we won't really be using all of the capabilities of the dental team to their full advantage. If we fail to capitalize on this opportunity, we'll miss the chance to broaden the scope and efficiency of our practices. ■



**Tricia Osuna, RDH, BS**

Ms. Osuna is a clinician, educator, lecturer, and product evaluator. Her company, Professional Insights, provides consulting services and market research evaluations. She is a member of the ADHA and currently serves on the Dental Board of California. You may contact Ms. Osuna at [osunardh@aol.com](mailto:osunardh@aol.com).