

Stefanie Rufo

An Original Essay on Promoting Our Profession

September 1, 2025

Seton Hall University

In a time of uncertainty, we must unite as dental hygiene professionals. Afterall, that is who we are, professionals. We have gone through blood, sweat, and tears to become licensed to provide preventative oral healthcare to our communities. Our expertise is being attacked and undermined as we face challenges in our role in clinical practice. What is our purpose anymore? There is a sense of limbo as we are needed but not wanted. Is there a need for more hygienists or are we being disregarded as professionals? As our role is becoming clouded with judgement, this is the time we must stand up for ourselves and have our voices heard.

As members of NJDHA, we have taken the first step in fighting back, but there is more work that needs to be done. I believe a critical step is ensuring we do not undermine our work and our role in the dental office. We are not simply “hygienists” but rather registered dental hygienists, we completed a very specific education and training and passed exams to become licensed. Additionally, we do not provide “cleanings” but rather dental prophylaxis, periodontal maintenance, or therapy. Changing the language we use to describe ourselves in just these two instances can begin to change the way our patients, our colleagues, and the community see our role. We do not have to stop there, but it is a great start.

It is incredible to see how we can band together during times of struggle as the louder our voices, the more we are heard. We can also promote our profession by expanding our knowledge. Since we already participate in continuing education, we can harness this opportunity to expand on our knowledge and skills. As we learn more and become more comfortable speaking to the public about oral health and the connection to the rest of the body, we can earn the respect of those trying to silence us. Continuing education courses, however, require that research is being done so we remain relevant and timely. There are roles that registered dental hygienists can

pursue in addition to clinical practice, and research is necessary to support our claims that we have a vital importance in society.

In the end, we are the ones that must promote change. We must fight for ourselves by being who we were trained to be, licensed preventative oral healthcare professionals. This begins with the way we speak about ourselves and our practice, it progresses by expanding our profession and is supported by empirical evidence. To enact positive change, we must be a part of the process. I ask that we continue to voice our concerns to those minimizing our roles and to the community at large. We are registered dental hygienists, and we are essential community providers.