

The Dental Hygienist - Therapist

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The Capping Ceremony is the most significant event in the life of the Dental Hygienist. This is the time when she officially becomes part of the Dental Hygiene profession. At this time the hygienist reviews past events and also looks ahead to the future.

We are pleased that this year we were able to effect the transfer of Dental Hygiene from the College of Liberal Arts to the Dental School. The Dental Hygienist rightfully belongs in the School of Dentistry. She is the most important part of the dental health team. She is a dental health educator in the private dental office, in schools, with the Public Health Service, in the Armed Services and many other Institutions and Agencies.

We all know that there is a national shortage of Dental Hygienists. In New Jersey, only 12 per cent of all New Jersey dentists employ hygienists. More hygienists must be educated to become parts of the dental health team, especially in preventive dentistry programs. It was for this reason that in a speech, which I gave in Detroit last year, I proposed that Dental Hygienists not be used as expanded duty hygienists (or as they are sometimes called dental therapists). The dental therapist has been proposed to fill the large gap between what treatment the dentist renders and what services the hygienist is legally empowered to perform. The therapist would be permitted to treat patients to a greater degree than what is currently delegated to hygienists. Like the hygienist, however, the dental therapist would work under the direct supervision of the dentist.

In the past year, I've given this whole area of expanded duties considerable thought, and have taken the woman's prerogative to change my mind. Many educators agree that the dental hygienist is the most over-educated member of the health team. She is educated beyond the level which she is legally permitted to practice. As I view it now, it would be much simpler if the dental therapist were trained within the present structure of the Dental Hygiene Program. The dental hygienist presently receives all of the basic science instruction and over half of the clinical instruction necessary to educate a dental therapist. Under the circumstances then, if and when the laws of the state permit the practice of dental therapists, then the Dental Hygiene Programs within the confines of dental schools could be utilized for training expanded duty dental hygienists. There are many new Dental Hygiene Programs being developed in the Community Colleges throughout the state. Hopefully, some day these programs will alleviate the tremendous shortage of Dental Hygienists. During the interim, the Fairleigh Dickinson University School of Dental Hygiene will be producing teachers to staff these programs as well as fill the needs of the Public Health Service, other local, state and Federal agencies and private practice. To recapitulate then, the four year dental hygiene programs in dental schools would be restructured to educate an expanded duty dental hygienist (i.e. dental therapist) and the two year programs would be used to educate the traditional Dental Hygienist.

The Dental Hygienist provides a valuable service, which is essential to the well-being of society. The Dental Hygienist is concerned more with the treatment she or he is rendering than the profit from such service. The Dental Hygienist recognizes the need to join professional organizations to share new knowledge and new developments of professional practice. The Dental Hygienist has had an intensive educational program to prepare her to render competent service. This educational program should continue all of her professional life.