ADHA Hosts Dental Hygiene in a Changing World:
Leading and Developing Your Career

By Mariam Pera

On February 25, 2012, ADHA hosted a workshop entitled Dental Hygiene in a Changing World: Leading and Developing Your Career (DHIACW), which aimed to empower attendees to take charge of their career path. The brainchild of ADHA President Pam Quinones, RDH, BS, the workshop was cosponsored by Johnson & Johnson Healthcare Products and Premier Dental Products Co. DHIACW offered guidance to dental hygienists who might be looking for opportunities outside of private practice, regardless of where they were in their careers. Attendees were categorized according to their interest in various fields—education, public health, corporate, research, administration and new career coaching.

"In my time as ADHA president, I’ve gotten the chance to meet many dental hygienists, and often they express anxiety over their professional futures, especially as clinical positions are declining," Quinones said. "With so many hygienists unemployed or underemployed, it is ADHA’s responsibility as their professional association to offer guidance. We want to help move our profession forward by giving all dental hygienists the necessary tools to navigate the future of their profession. This workshop had something to offer hygienists at every stage in their professional development, and provided a glimpse into the different sectors where a dental hygiene education can take you."

The workshop featured Marsha Rhea, one of the futurists who put together the ADHA Environmental Scan (Dental Hygiene at the Crossroads of Change), as the keynote speaker. Rhea walked attendees through the scan, explaining what each piece meant for the future of the profession, and what changes to expect going forward.

"It was an inspiring day for both workshop presenters and attendees that included students, new graduates and experienced dental hygienists to network and develop strategies and action plans to meet new challenges and opportunities the dental hygiene profession faces to better serve our patients."

– Colleen M. Brickle, RDH, RF, EdD, Dean of Health Sciences, Normandale Community College

While at their tables, attendees participated in two discussions. The first, titled ‘Thinking Outside The Box,’ centered on what interested them in the workshop and why they chose a specific sector. The second, ‘Designing Your Own Career Path,’ focused on how they would use the information they received at the workshop to move forward with their goals.

"I felt a sense of ‘oneness’ as a profession, not just as an association. I am familiar with attending the ADHA annual session. What has always struck me is the unity and the impression that, while we are from different regions, we are on the same page as to what we want for the future of our profession. I felt that same energy at DHIACW," said Carolynn Wahl, RDH, BS. "I am accustomed to being informed on issues and discussing them with my colleagues, because I am involved in my association on a state and national level. What struck me [about DHIACW] was that this room full of colleagues, members and potential members, students and individuals who have never attended an ADHA function echoed the same concerns as those of us who are ‘involved’. It was like a mega-issues forum at annual session! The energy in the room was so positive, the takeaway so empowering: education, networking and leadership!"

"Workshops can help individuals create energy and enthusiasm among ourselves that then may inspire us to map out a course of action," said Laurel Bleak, RDH, BSDH. "At our table, most of us seemed to be searching for a way to try something different than what we had been doing. Some had specific ideas of what they wanted to do but didn’t know how to get started. Others had vague thoughts that they wanted to change and no specific plan at all. At the end of the workshop, I think each person at our table felt very energized..."
"I was impressed with the energy, enthusiasm and passion in those who attended this workshop since it demonstrated to me that dental hygienists are looking futuristically towards our changing roles and place in delivering oral health care. We need to value our professional organization and network with many colleagues to develop our professional career path. I hope that all of the workshop attendees will follow through with their personal strategy in attaining their aspirations—in a changing world!"

- Lillian Caperila, RDH, BSDH, MEd, Manager of Professional Education, Premier Dental Products Company

"I was energized and loved hearing from the other panelists and the audience and meeting new friends. It is a changing world and we are all responsible for leading and developing our career as openly shared by our passionate group of panelists. Although in different roles, all the panelists were willing to step out of their comfort zones and were open to opportunities presented as well as to seek/create opportunities, open to be mentored and to mentor others. The audience was engaged and energetic and I was delighted to hear from some participants in the weeks afterwards.”

- Christine Charles, RDH, BS, Director, Scientific and Professional Affairs, Global Consumer Healthcare Research and Development, Johnson & Johnson Consumer and Personal Products Worldwide

and supported by participating, and wanted to return home and get started on whatever.”

During the second table discussion, the new career coaching group—led by Quinones—left the main meeting room to discuss how to create resumes, cover letters, and other resources for marketing themselves to employers.

“The breakout session with President Quinones was a great success,” said Ashley Smith, ADHA executive office assistant, who helped staff the workshop. “Attendees in this group varied from students about to enter the workforce to seasoned hygienists ready to enter a different area of dental hygiene. They were coached on the basics of preparing a resume and encouraged to highlight their talents and personality to stand out. It provided a challenge to think outside the box and gain confidence in order to launch their new careers.”

“Students were encouraged to select the new career coaching section of the program, which was a fantastic opportunity for students to meet with other students, learn resume tips, and use ADHA resources such as the ADHA Employment Reference Guide,” said Lilliane Smothers, ADHA manager of student relations.

The workshop featured a panel of dental hygienists, one from each of the sectors used to organize attendees: Colleen M. Brickle, RDH, RF, EdD (education); Mary Pat Burgess, RDH, MBA (public health); Lillian Caperila, RDH, BSDH, MEd (corporate); Christine Charles, RDH, BS (research); and Tammy Filipiak, RDH, MS (administration). The panelists addressed several questions on the responsibilities, skill sets and challenges associated with their positions. All of the panelists emphasized a strong educational background—at least a baccalaureate degree—as well as networking and flexibility as key factors in broadening their career paths.

Burgess explained that dental hygienists already have the knowledge and abilities needed for careers in different sectors, particularly in public health.

“You don’t have to have a public health education. You learn on the job,” she said. Since much of her job is negotiating with unions and other groups, collaboration is a key part of public health.

“Management skills include personal skills, and it comes down to personal fortitude to negotiate compromise. ‘I want a, b, c—who do you want?’”

Brickle explained that, as an educator and dean, one of her biggest challenges was getting health science faculty members and students to learn to work together. "Conflict management is challenging because you have to focus on people and separate them from the problem," she said. Brickle added that mentoring and active listening are vital in moving forward and being a lifelong learner.

Speaking on challenges she encountered on her path, Filipiak made a profound statement that resonated with the audience. "My biggest obstacle was myself," she said. "I was standing in my own way, but my self-doubt was overcome with the support of my family and friends." She added that being open-minded and a collaborative leader are essential to success.

The other panelists echoed the importance of being open to new opportunities. "Adapting to change is a constant. You have to give up the way things were," Charles said. "Take risks to step out to a new company and culture. Lack of confidence slows progress.”

Caperila explained that she came into her position in the corporate world by being in the right place at the right time. She added that the skills that help her succeed in the corporate arena are communication, networking and a solid educational foundation. "Everything you do in your career builds experience for something new," she said.

All the panelists stressed professional involvement—on the local, state and national levels—to be an integral part of networking and creating opportunities for dental hygienists.

"I think after the workshop I got thinking more specifically about how the profession might change and how it might occur,” said Bleak. "Our profession is changing whether we like it or
“As a participant and panelist in the program I was inspired by those attending. It was clear to me that there are hygienists looking for alternative pathways in their career and willing to take the initiative to venture out and do something new and different. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to share more detail on my job with Midwest and Mountain Dental and connect with individuals after the program. I was excited to be part of this new program with ADHA.”

– Tammy Filipiak, RDH, MS, Director of Clinical Development, Midwest Dental & Mountain Dental Support Center

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want it to or not. We have to be at the table when mid-level providers are discussed or we won’t be going anywhere; however, what the workshop made me realize is where we end up is ultimately up to us individually. ADHA can help us get to the table to get a start, but ADHA won’t get us there; each of us will have to do it ourselves. The organization may inspire us to push past our personal boundaries to invent or try something new, but we will have to do it individually. The end result will be all of that individual creativity will collectively move the profession forward.”

Since attending DHIACW, Bleak and a colleague at her table started to email each other about little steps they wanted to take and encouraged each other. “And when we accomplished them, we let each other know. Seize those little victories.”

“I came out [of the workshop] reminding myself that there are no perfect answers to the questions in our lives and profession, and we as dental hygienists want that perfect world,” said Regina Pfister, RDH, MSED. “I do know the only way I can feel good about all of this is with others I can purge with. I came out of that meeting with more energy than I have had in months. If what my goals were before are not met, then so be it, there will be other goals to accomplish.”

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