

Men in Dental Hygiene

By **Frances Moffett**

For as long as the profession has been around, women have been the faces of dental hygiene. This is likely due to the fact that, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 99 percent of dental hygienists are women.¹

Although dental hygiene is often portrayed as a woman's profession, there is a small percentage of men embarking on the career not usually considered by males. However, men practicing dental hygiene sometimes have a special set of circumstances to overcome. Factors like age and gender discrimination, as well as possible discomfort among patients, can make it harder for them to find employment and gain respect in the position.

S.T. Phillips, BSDH, of Siler City, N.C., has been a dental hygienist for seven years. He said that while he was a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he had no negative experiences that hindered his intent to pursue dental hygiene. It wasn't until he tried to secure a position as a clinical dental hygienist that he experienced gender discrimination.

"I worked for a dental temporary agency that told me that some dentists would request that the agency not send any black [people] or males," Phillips explained. "I had dentists' wives contact me by phone prior to interviewing me so that they could legally ask if I was married or had kids, [by] which I presumed they were inquiring about my sexual preference."

Phillips said that he felt disappointed and angry, but he never gave up on his career. Michael Danley, RDH, of Shawnee, Kansas, currently works as a dental office gen-

eral manager. He said that he is not unfamiliar with that form of discrimination.

"Some hygiene schools would not accept males," the dental hygienist of 34 years said. "When I graduated, it took me three months to find a job. I was the first [male dental hygienist] to practice in the Kansas City area. The dentists did not know what to make of a male RDH."

He also explained that in an office where he worked many years ago, he encountered two coworkers who tried to make him quit because they did not want a male dental hygienist in the office. Needless to say, Danley stuck it out anyway.

Glenn Eicher, RDH, of Santa Cruz, Calif., said that when he was researching the career of dental hygiene, he was advised not to pursue it.

"My [job] consultant said he thought being a dental hygienist would be good for me," he said. "I did not even know what a dental hygienist was, [but] he did a very good job explaining the job details. He asked if I was interested in talking to someone [in the profession]. I called her, finding she graduated the year I was born—1934! She gave me a good idea of what was involved, but she recommended against it for me. I asked her why and she could not tell me. I asked

my dentist at the time about it, and he also recommended against it. I asked him why, and he didn't tell me either."

But Eicher, who is a former California highway patrolman, decided not to take their advice and pursued it anyway. He has been a dental hygienist for over 35 years



Clockwise from left: Glenn Eicher, RDH, a former highway patrolman, has been a dental hygienist for over 35 years; S.T. Phillips, BSDH, a dental hygienist of seven years, initially wanted to become a physician assistant; Doug Fink, RDH, was formerly a grocery store manager and owned his own insurance agency; Michael Laflamme, RDH, was in the Air Force and has a bachelor's degree in broadcasting and communication.

now and said that he hasn't encountered any discrimination since then.

Michael Laflamme, a recent graduate and class valedictorian of Western Career College's dental hygiene program in San Jose, Calif., added that he was also discouraged from becoming a dental hygienist while he was in school studying architectural engineering technology in 1986.

"During my first month in the program, I visited the dental hygiene program as a patient and fell in love with the profession," he said. "I couldn't stop talking to the student hygienist about all she was doing. Later I spoke with an RDH instructor about changing majors from engineering to hygiene. The exchange ended with the instructor saying something like, 'I can't let you...nobody will hire a guy.'"

Laflamme eventually joined the Air Force where he was able to get a job in dental assisting and hygiene, which later prompted him to obtain his degree in dental hygiene.

Lester Leong, BSDH, of Oakland, Calif., concurred that he actually had an office manager at a prospective employer tell him that the male doctor would not want to hire him because he was a man.

"I was stunned and insulted," he said. "I reported it to the referral service that told me about this particular job. They in turn reprimanded the office, telling them what they had done was illegal. The office apologized to the referral service but never directly to me."

Not only do men in dental hygiene sometimes have to endure unfair treatment by those apprehensive about allowing male dental hygienists in their practice, but they also have to worry about the comfort level of the patients.

Doug Smithy, BSDH, of Salt Lake City, has been a hygienist for 13 years and expressed that he experienced this particular issue after gaining licensure.



Doug Smithy, BSDH, of Salt Lake City, previously worked as an instructional assistant in early childhood education with hopes of becoming a special education instructor. He has been a dental hygienist for 13 years.



Stephen Durrant, BSDH, of Virginia Beach, Va., spent 21 years as a dental hygienist. He was also in the U.S. Marine Corps and has a bachelor's degree in biology.

"I had inquired about a particular job with a local agency and was told that the doctor felt as though his patients would not be comfortable with a male dental hygienist," he said.

Laflamme shared similar sentiments. He explained, "During my time in the Air Force, working with 12 dentists from around the country, only one said he would be able to hire a male hygienist...they simply stated that the members of the community from the states they came from wouldn't feel comfortable with a male hygienist."

Leong said that he has encountered patients who have been uncomfortable with a male hygienist and have asked not to see him

because they prefer having a female clinician, but he said that it really boils down to chemistry.

Mike Dillow, RDH, of Jackson, Mo., said that he tries to use his gender to his advantage. "One female employer told me the staff acts differently with a male co-worker, and she liked that," he said. "On occasion, I will have a patient say they've never had a male hygienist, but that situation simply makes me want to provide an

over-the-top experience for them. While I may have turned off a potential employer or two, I have yet to have a patient refuse to see me because of my gender. As in any job, you have to sell yourself to your employer, be a team player and give 100 percent effort to your patients. Do that, and employers will forget what gender you are."

Gender isn't the only factor that can prevent a male dental hygienist from obtaining a job. Sometimes age can be a potential barrier, especially since many of the men in dental hygiene who were interviewed for this article have taken various career paths prior to their positions in oral health.

"The majority of my 44 classmates were [young] enough to be my daughters—but I was treated as an equal, and we got along great," retired dental hygienist Stephen Durrant, BSDH, of Virginia Beach, Va., said. "However, my gender and age were definite issues when I began my job search in



Lester Leong, BSDH, of Oakland, Calif., has been a dental hygienist for 27 years, and he also has a bachelor of arts degree in physiology.



Abel Corona, RDH, of Watsonville, Calif., has a bachelor's degree in biology with a minor in Spanish; he was an instructional assistant before practicing dental hygiene.

the local community. I was not able to get an interview. Finally, after two months of mailing resumes and calling offices, I received a call from an office manager of one of the practices, who was the wife of the owner of the practice. She was interested in 'having another man in the practice.'"

A common misconception among patients is that men in the position of dental hygienist are the dentist or on their way to dental school—not the hygienist.

Jason Sanford Keem, RDH, of Buffalo, N.Y., said, "Almost every day, new patients in the practice refer to me as 'doctor.' After correcting them with my proper title, they ask me if I am in dental school or going to become a dentist. At this point in my life, I am very happy helping people as a dental hygienist."

Abel Corona, RDH, of Watsonville, Calif., can relate to that particular experience. "It was funny, and I did not mind, but many of my Hispanic patients would call me 'doctor' and even though I explained to them I was not the dentist, they still kept on calling me 'doctor,'" he said.

Michael Long, RDH, of San Francisco, said, "I get asked a lot if dental hygiene is a stepping stone for me to continue on to dental

school. Maybe as a man in a traditionally women's profession, patients assume that I would not be content with my career choice."

Although Hani Mohsenzadeh, of Stockton, Calif., is a recent graduate of dental hygiene school, he still has noticed the same trend.

"I [must] confuse some of my patients because they call me 'doctor.' I believe the stereotype of a male doctor and a female hygienist still exists in the public's mind," he said.

He also hopes to dispel that stereotype that only women are dental hygienists.

"It is my goal to educate society about the dental hygiene profession, to show it as the preventative frontier of oral disease and [to show] hygienists as promoters of oral health, regardless of gender," he explained. "I think that with time, society will acclimate to the idea of a male dental hygienist."

Like Mohsenzadeh, Keem said he also sees this stereotype. "Even with the number of women outpacing men graduating from dental school, sexism takes place. People perceive men as 'doctor' and women as 'assistant.'"

Although some men in the career of dental hygiene have faced challenges that sometimes come along with being a minority in a particular job field, others have not. And regardless of those challenges, men in this profession con-

tinue to be optimistic that more men will become dental hygienists.

Eicher believes this to be true. "I think men are well-accepted in this field. There are a lot more women as dentists today than when I started, and I think that might be a factor in opening the field up for more men [to get involved]."

"I think that with greater awareness of the profession, we'll see more men going into it," Ilya Babiy, BSDH, of Troutdale, Ore., said. "They'll see what a great hidden gem they've been missing out on."

Long said, "Dental hygiene has always been considered primarily a female profession. Most men see this as a female career, and if interested in dentistry, they seem to lean toward a dental license. I believe men in dental hygiene will grow over time, as it did with men in nursing over the years."

Doug Fink, RDH, of Greeley, Colo., agrees. "In the past, most doctors were men, and staff was made up of women, but in recent years, this has changed," said the recent graduate from the dental

hygiene program at Laramie County Community College in Cheyenne, Wyo. "Women are accepted as doctors and men

have entered the profession as nurses and support staff. I do believe that the num-

ber of males will continue to go up in time, just like it did for the ratio of men to women in nursing. It is becoming more acceptable for men to be [employees] instead of the role of business owner or the boss."

"I believe it's the same situation as it was with nurses," Corona added. "It had always been a female-dominated field and thus everyone thought it was only for women, but slowly over the years, males have jumped that hurdle and now more male nurses are seen. Eventually, I believe that dental hygiene will jump that hurdle, and we will begin seeing more and more males going into this profession. A goal that I have for myself is to someday become an instructor at a dental hygiene institution. This way, I can let it be known that not only females are in this field but also males like me."

Stephen Daniels, RDH, of Richmond, Va., said, "I think men will certainly give more scrutiny to career choices in light of the recent economic downturn, especially

in the allied health fields."

Courtney Stewart, RDH, of Manchester, Conn., added, "More men are not in this profession because, in my opinion, they don't know it is an option. If more men knew this was an option, they would look into it."

Speaking of his own time as a dental hygienist, Stewart continued, "My personal experience has been wonderful. I



Jason Keem, RDH, of Buffalo, N.Y., a dental hygienist of eight years, resigned from his position as an individual residential specialist. He holds a bachelor's in geography with a minor in computer information systems.



Hani Mohsenzadeh, RDH, of Stockton, Calif., originally wanted to study biochemistry but was drawn to dental hygiene after shadowing a hygienist in his sister's dental office.

"I think that with greater awareness of the profession, we'll see more men going into it," Ilya Babiy, BSDH, of Troutdale, Ore., said. "They'll see what a great hidden gem they've been missing out on."



Mike Dillow, RDH, of Jackson, Mo., worked as an assistant vice president and branch manager for a large retail bank in Charlotte County, Fla., before becoming a dental hygienist.



Michael Danley, RDH, of Shawnee, Kan., a dental hygienist of 34 years, worked as a dental X-ray tech after completing his time in the Navy.



Stephen Daniels, RDH, of Richmond, Va., has been a dental hygienist for almost a year and was previously a mobile electronics installer.



Courtney Stewart, RDH, of Manchester, Conn., works at a community health center in Hartford, Conn. Before embarking on dental hygiene, Stewart was a dental assistant.



Ilya Babiy, BSDH, of Troutdale, Ore., works part-time in public health and part-time in private practice. He has been a dental hygienist for a year and a half.



Michael Long, RDH, of San Francisco, has been working in the dental field since 1990, holding such positions as registered dental assistant, dental insurance clerk and office administrator of group practices.

work in the community that I grew up in and it feels great to give back. To all young men who may want to be a dental hygienist, I say go for it. It is a wonderful career."

Smithey added, "I have had such an incredibly fun time working with my peers who have such a strong vision for the future of this profession. I attribute a great deal to the women of this profession who have passionately paved the way for not only me, but men and women alike, to find success within a career in dental hygiene."

"It's a wonderful field with excellent growth and potential, and one in which you can develop great professional and personal satisfaction in knowing you are providing a valuable service to people in need of all ages," Dillow said.

Babiy also added, "I look forward to coming to work, and I enjoy seeing my co-workers and patients. As a dental hygienist, I feel like I have some influence on my patients' attitudes toward their overall health."

Additionally, Daniels said, "I find it satisfying. I enjoy meeting new people and constantly learning new things."

"I find a lot of personal fulfillment within the patient-clinician dynamic," Mohsenzadeh concluded. "Being a dental hygienist is not just about cleaning teeth, it is about reaching out to the public and educating them. It is about motivating the public to become proactive in their oral health. After all, the mouth is the window to the general health."

Reference

1. Current population survey. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2007. Accessed Apr. 1, 2009. Available at: <http://www.bls.gov/oes/2007/may/figure12.pdf>.

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