



Vital channel: a short history of dental hygiene in Glasgow

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The "father of dental hygiene" is recognised to be Alfred C. Fones, who started training dental hygienists in 1913 in Philadelphia. He said that the dental hygienist "must regard herself as the channel through which dentistry's knowledge of mouth hygiene is disseminated."¹

During the First World War proposals were made to introduce similar staff in the UK, and "dressers", as they were known, are recorded around this time. But the Dentists Act of 1921 stopped the practice of dressers and it was not until 1943 that the Royal Air Force introduced training for dental hygienists. An extract from the MTE (Medical Training Establishment) Journal in 1941 states: "In the service it is essential that everybody should be made dentally fit, and that dental fitness be maintained. This is necessary to assure efficiency and accuracy and so avoid the wastage of man hours."² Could this statement still be used 60 years on?

The author, who was one of the instigators of training, went on to say that if the hygienist scheme could be carried out to the full extent, in time to come, a smaller number of fillings, extractions, and dentures would be required by patients. A radical thought in these pre-NHS times when less than 10% of the population attended for regular dental treatment.

The first UK dental hygienists qualified in the Royal Air Force in 1944 and have been trained in the services from that time. In 1949 a civilian trial for five years was started at the Eastman Dental Hospital, London. This trial proved to be successful and a common syllabus was established. The training period was a minimum of nine months although many schools programmed more than the requisite 39 weeks. In 1960 dental auxiliaries, or therapists as they are now known, were introduced from the New Cross Training School in London and restricted to practising within the government services of the NHS.

By the mid-1980s all dental schools had schools of hygiene within them. At one time there were 19 schools throughout the UK. With the amalgamation of the service schools to the Defence Dental Agency there are now 17, including the schools at St Bartholomew's and the Royal London, which has replaced the New Cross Training School and trains dually qualified hygienists and therapists. Cardiff, the Eastman, and Sheffield have dual training courses.

Glasgow

In 1969, while the "new building" was being planned, there was talk of there being a school of dental hygiene at Glasgow. The Dental Surgery Assistants training scheme had been introduced and for a short time the hospital ran a three-year course for dental technicians. Max Taylor, board secretary, Lady Betty Gunn, a member of the Health Board, and Ken Stephen (later to become Professor of Dental Public Health) with others promoted the opening of a school in Glasgow during the early 1970s. Funding was obtained from the Scottish Office and plans to open the school were formalised. The school was to be sited on C level (now level 1) in the new block. The first director and senior tutor were appointed in August, 1979 and a secretary, two dental nurses, and a further tutor were appointed prior to the first intake in January, 1980. A pilot scheme had originally been planned but as the director of the new school had been a director with the RADC and the senior tutor had previously been tutor to the dental surgery assistant course, this idea was abandoned in favour of a full course.

Courses were started in January and August of each year, and that meant there was a capacity for 20 qualified dental hygienists per year out of a total of 200 throughout the UK. By 1984 the staff had been increased to one senior and three tutor dental hygienists and one senior and two dental nurses. The increased number of tutors was nearer the original recommendations for the staff of dental hygiene schools – and this school was also committed to regular continuing professional education courses for dental hygienists/therapists, the first school in the UK to make this provision.

In 1993, with a reorganisation of accommodation within the hospital, the clinical area for the school moved to level 7 (J level) and is now continuous with the undergraduate clinic. This meant closer integration of dental undergraduates' and student dental hygienists' training and has resulted in the school becoming more obviously part of the restorative department. In 1996 the 48-week course was changed to a two-year course, in recognition of the cramped syllabus. This also meant that students were able to devote more time to investigative learning, and an elective study was introduced. It did however reduce the annual intake to 10 students, the entry date being January of each year.

At the present time there are two pathways of entry into training, one being the traditional route with a minimum of five standard grade passes with a certificate of dental nursing equivalent to the national certificate, the other being three Higher passes with no previous nursing experience. All prospective students should have English and biology at a minimum of standard grade level three. Once they have achieved their diploma, dental hygienists, who must enrol/register annually with the General Dental Council, may work in any sector of dentistry. Once the patient has been examined by a dentist who has indicated the course of treatment in writing, the dental hygienists' duties include cleaning and polishing of teeth, scaling – including root planing – and the application of medicaments appropriate thereto. They may apply any prophylactic material that the GDC may from time to time determine. They are permitted to administer local infiltration anaesthesia only when there is a dentist on the premises; they are also permitted to place temporary restorations if the restoration has been lost during the course of treatment by the dental hygienist once they have had training to do so.

The future for clinical Professional Complementary to Dentistry (PCD) and for dental hygienists in particular is under review at the present time. It is expected that restrictions relating to the presence of a dentist while local infiltration anaesthesia is being administered will be lifted. Duties at present being considered are, among others, the recementing of crowns, taking of impressions, and the administration of block anaesthesia. Those who have undergone suitable further training will be permitted to perform these duties. Education rather than the present prescriptive system will control changes which may occur in the future.

More than 4000 dental hygienists are enrolled at the moment throughout the UK, and approximately 340 have been trained at Glasgow to date. Most training schools are considering the possibility of dual qualifications. Many schools are now linked through examination with the universities, and the first degree course in the UK has been established at Manchester. After nearly 60 years of training, dental hygiene is still reviewing and progressing its role within the wider dental team.

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1 Fones, A.C. (ed.), *Mouth Hygiene*, (4th edition, Philadelphia, 1934), p.248.

2 Sqn. Ldr. Smith, "The WAAF Dental Clerk Orderly", *Royal Air Force MTE Journal*, April-May 1944

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