

Publication: Dentistry

Date: July 2009

Circulation: 20,334

Two heads are better than one

Reflecting on a recent investigation, Diana Woodward believes that nursing support for hygienists and therapists is a long time coming

As dental professionals we have a range of excellent publications to stimulate us and give us fresh insights, like *Dentistry* magazine. I find the Annual Review from Dental Protection beneficial, the articles and reading about another's experiences challenge me without any finger-wagging. I remember learning there about the practice of reflection, a process that involves looking back on what we did, how we did it and why. It sounds almost like a detective's mantra but I can see clear advantages because so often we just do things because we've always done them; sometimes there is another way or a different approach.

I find it encouraging to know there are people with



Diana Woodward qualified as a dental hygienist in 1971 during a four-year engagement in the WRNS. She has worked mainly in the NHS, but also in private practices, hospital and community, dental health education and with special needs. She gained the Certificate in Health Education at Gloscat in 1986. Diana enjoys writing and has had several non-fiction articles published.

these 'soft skills' in dentistry. As dentists are normally more scientific it has always seemed to be the hygienist who had the people skills and were putting forward the patient's point of view. We were the ones who listened to patients and could often see an alternative treatment option. The problem was finding an opportunity to discuss it with a dentist.

The research

The recent investigation into nursing support for the hygienist and hygienist-therapist has made interesting reading. The survey, undertaken by Amanda Gallie, Alistair Lomax and Emma Pacey, explored whether nursing support was beneficial to patients and dental hygienist/therapists.

The results showed that better posture could be maintained by the hygienist if a nurse was assisting, resulting in fewer musculoskeletal problems; and the patient was more comfortable and less likely to drown if a nurse was aspirating, therefore the clinician was less stressed. The hygienist/therapist was able to concentrate more attention on the patient and the work in hand, rather than anticipating the hurried changeover and what needed to be done, plus with two people to look after the patient there was more emotional support.

"We were the ones who listened to patients and could often see an alternative treatment"

The benefits of having a chaperone was also mentioned, but the stringent infection control measures mean that the nurse cannot be in the surgery all the time. Trained dental nurses do seem to find the work repetitive and, I hate to use the word, boring. Untrained nurses are not good at aspirating, but these are my observations.

One comment from a respondent rang a bell with me. She said she had no spittoon in her surgery and therefore didn't even have a few seconds respite. Reaching over for the funnel in the aspirator, holding it for the patient then settling them back again was exhausting, I remember. When a nurse does it for you there is the total luxury of being able to stretch your back and perhaps even take a couple of deep breaths as well.

Apparently, you are more likely to have the chance of nursing support if you are in the north-west of England and the final decision is made by the employing dentist/corporate/management so we don't really have the choice – yet! But we live in hope.