

ADVANCING THE NATIONAL PROFILE OF THE DENTAL HYGIENE PROFESSION

It is said that slow growth is better than no growth. That we must understand that progress is a process that leads to success. For over 10 years, the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) has been involved in advocacy efforts to change the Department of Labor's (DOL) Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) and the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) that apply to dental hygienists. After much effort, the OOH and SOC now better reflect current dental hygiene practice.

OCCUPATIONAL OUTLOOK HANDBOOK

ADHA has long advocated for the upgrading of the classification for dental hygienists. One step in that ongoing process is a thorough review of the OOH, which serves as a guideline for any such reclassification. The OOH is a federal resource for career guidance featuring hundreds of occupations. Dental hygiene educators and students can utilize the OOH to learn more about the dental hygiene work environment and projected job outlook as well as to explore resources for employment and wages by state and area.

Updating the OOH began when Ann Battrell, MSDH, chief executive officer was ADHA director of education. Battrell spearheaded work that would correct and clarify the role of the dental hygienist within the DOL's OOH. After many years of input, comments and setting the stage; and after numerous exchanges of drafts back and forth, and in-person meetings with the DOL official responsible for the dental hygienist profile in the OOH, ADHA is very pleased to have delivered for its members in 2016.

The window for comment is limited, as the OOH is only revised every two years. With solid input from ADHA, the 2015-2016 dental hygienist profile well reflects the sustained input of ADHA over many years and is a vastly improved portrayal of the education, expanding scope of practice and direct access capacity of dental hygienists than the previous 2013-2014 dental hygienist profile. Summarized below are key improvements in the 2015-2016 editions as compared to the 2013-2014 profile. Two key highlights that reflect successful advocacy efforts on the part of ADHA:

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1. Under the heading "Important Qualities," a new quality was added as the first in the list of five: "Critical thinking. Dental hygienists must use critical thinking skills in order to assess and evaluate patients." Critical thinking and patient assessment and evaluation were not found in the 2013-2014 editions.
2. Under the heading "Important Qualities," the quality "Detail oriented" includes the phrase, "Depending on the state in which they work and/or the treatment provided, dental hygienists may work without the direct supervision of a dentist." In the previous edition, the phrase read: "In rare cases, dental hygienists work without the supervision of a dentist."

STANDARD OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION UPDATE

Building off the OOH revisions, the Standard Occupational Classification Policy Committee (SOCPC) asked for comments on the 2018 SOC revision. The SOC is a classification system used by federal statistical agencies to "classify workers into occupational categories for the purpose of collecting, calculating, or disseminating data." Information such as employment levels and projections, pay and benefits, skills required, and other demographics are widely used by the public, interested stakeholders and public policy-makers. The federal agencies that use the SOC system include, but are not limited to, the Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Department of Defense, Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Labor.

All workers are classified into one of 867 detailed occupations according to their occupational definition. Occupations with similar job duties, and in some cases skills, education

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and/or training, are grouped together in the SOC. The SOC has undergone four revisions, first in 1980, and again in 2000, 2010 and the current 2018 revision. In 2014, ADHA recommended a change in the definition and offered suggested language. The revised SOC reflects those changes!

- **Previous Standard Occupational Classification description for Dental Hygienist reads as follows:** Clean teeth and examine oral areas, head, and neck for signs of oral disease. May educate patients on oral hygiene, take and develop x rays, or apply fluoride or sealants.
- **Current Standard Occupational Classification description reads for Dental Hygienists as follows:** Administer oral hygiene care to patients. Assess patient oral hygiene problems or needs and maintain medical records. Advise patients on oral health maintenance and disease prevention. May provide advanced care such as providing fluoride treatment or administering topical anesthesia.

The revised SOC includes a significant change in description, and while the revision falls short of what we would like to see, we are pleased in the responsiveness of the SOCPC. Clearly, "providing fluoride treatment or administering topical anesthesia" is not "advanced care." ADHA strongly advocates for accurate representation of dental hygiene services (ADHA Policy, 10S-14/3-94). ADHA will continue seek further revisions to best reflect the practice of dental hygiene today. ■

Stateline is prepared by the ADHA Division of Education and Professional Advocacy.