Statement from the American Dental Hygienists’ Association on Esther Wilkins, BS, RDH, DMD

It is with sadness that we share the news that Esther Wilkins, BS, RDH, DMD, dental hygiene’s matriarch, died on Monday, Dec. 12. We had celebrated her hundredth birthday only three days before. Wilkins dedicated her life to advancing oral health care, and her commitment to dental hygiene will not be forgotten.

Wilkins was the author of the textbook, Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist, the first edition of which appeared in 1959. The 12th edition was published this year. More than 90 percent of the dental hygiene education programs in the world include it on the syllabus. Every edition has a differently colored cover, and the book is so iconic to dental hygienists that, amongst themselves, they identify the era in which they were educated by the color of the book they used.

Wilkins earned a certificate in dental hygiene from the Forsyth School for Dental Hygienists in Boston, Mass., in 1939. She worked in private practice and in a school clinic while pursuing a doctorate in dentistry, which she earned from Tufts School of Dental Medicine in 1949.

In 1950, Wilkins single-handedly established the University of Washington Dental Hygiene School Program, developing the curriculum and teaching most of the courses herself. She served as its director for more than 10 years, after which she returned to Tufts to obtain
a specialty in periodontology in 1964. Following graduation, she served on the periodontology department faculty at Tufts, teaching periodontal instrumentation well into the 2000s.

Over the course of her lifetime, Wilkins developed and presented more than 750 continuing education courses for oral health care professionals and presented them in the United States, Canada and countries around the world. A consummate educator, she loved teaching and spending time with dental hygiene students. At professional meetings, including the ADHA Annual Conference, she always took time to speak and be photographed with students. A highlight of the Annual Conference was the student quiz program, Are You Smarter than Dr. Esther Wilkins?

In a 2005 interview with ADHA, Wilkins said, “If you are a student in an associate degree program, I encourage you to continue and pursue your bachelor’s degree. Then move on to your master’s degree. You must read, read, read, and keep up with the current research and literature.”

A longtime member of ADHA, Wilkins encouraged dental hygienists to join the organization and attend its meetings. “No man is an island,” she said, “and many dental hygienists work alone. They may not have another dental hygienist in the practice that they can talk with. So volunteer — there are many opportunities to volunteer in your local dental hygiene association and in community health.”

Wilkins is mourned by countless friends and colleagues around the world.

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**About the American Dental Hygienists’ Association**
The American Dental Hygienists’ Association (ADHA) is the largest national organization representing the professional interests of more than 185,000 dental hygienists across the country. Dental hygienists are preventive oral health professionals, licensed in dental hygiene, who provide educational, clinical and therapeutic services that support total health through the promotion of optimal oral health. For more information about ADHA, dental hygiene or the link between oral health and general health, visit ADHA at www.adha.org.