



The Expanding Role of the Dental Hygienist

Today's hygienists are stepping into broader clinical, technological, and leadership roles—helping practices improve patient outcomes, expand access to care, and rethink what preventive dentistry can be.

The role of the dental hygienist is evolving in real time. “They’re changing their mindset around their skill sets and around where and how and what dental hygienists can do,” said Lancette VanGuilder, BS, RDH, PHEDH, FADHA, president of the American Dental Hygienists’ Association (ADHA). She sees today’s hygienists reimagining the profession and taking a more active role in patient care, practice dynamics, and how oral health is understood in the broader community.

PROCEDURE WITH A PURPOSE

An educator, advocate, and hands-on clinician, VanGuilder has witnessed a shift over the past decade in how hygienists are viewed. “They used to be seen as procedure-based clinicians, but now we’re

seeing hygienists stepping up into their role within purpose-driven healthcare.”

An emphasis on the oral-systemic connection and the integration of medical and dental care may have something to do with this shift. VanGuilder noted that hygienists have always placed the patient at the center of everything they do. “We know that hygienists are typically the ones who spend the most amount of time with patients,” she said. “We’re connecting the dots for patients and ideally helping them create habit and lifestyle change to support oral and overall health.”

Kelsey Dalke, DHSc, MSDH, RDH, manager of customer success at Henry Schein One, agrees. “Hygiene is the backbone of a dental office,” she said. “The hygienist is the clinical team member that patients should see the most.”

BUILDING SKILLS TO MEET THE MOMENT

Hygienists can connect more dots than ever because of innovative technologies and opportunities to expand their skill sets. “I’ve been a hygienist for 30 years,” VanGuilder said. “I don’t do anything the same as I did even 5 or 10 years ago.”

She pointed to hygienists performing airway screenings, providing myofunctional therapy, offering salivary and HbA1c testing, administering vaccines, and using artificial intelligence.

“And I think there’s a really exciting frontier with minimally invasive care,” VanGuilder added. “These are the new skill sets that hygienists are bringing to the table, which not only provide great patient care, but also allow hygienists to have workplace variability.”

Dalke also noted how the scope of dental hygiene has expanded.

“It’s moved beyond just 6-month prophylaxes to taking proper diagnostics, using lasers, and applying medicaments,” she said. “Everything has expanded. We’re working to get patients into a stable position so that we can start having fun in the dental chair—esthetics and whitening. But we can’t get there if we don’t have a healthy situation.”

Beyond the clinical, VanGuilder calls on hygienists to ramp up their business acumen. “As a hygienist for the bulk of my career, I wasn’t involved in the business side of dentistry,” she said. “But the reality is that hygienists really need to step up on the business side. That means not just taking pride, but really taking accountability for the business side—understanding production, key performance indicators, workforce efficiencies, time management, how to retain patients, and how to provide the best possible experience.”

VanGuilder sees an opportunity for



“We know that hygienists are typically the ones who spend the most amount of time with patients. We’re connecting the dots for patients and ideally helping them create habit and lifestyle change to support oral and overall health.”

Lancette VanGuilder, BS, RDH, PHEDH, FADHA

hygienists to help improve workflow, sustainability, and production. “We should be the ones taking accountability for all of that in our departments.”

LOOKING BEYOND FOUR WALLS

Access to care frequently stands as the primary barrier to an individual’s health. As of 2024, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 57 million Americans were living in a dental health professional shortage area (with about 67% of these areas being in rural communities). That barrier can be overcome by bringing care to the patient. “There are hygienists who are taking their traditional practice and bringing it out to the community through mobile and portable care and teledentistry,” said VanGuilder.

“Our vision at the ADHA is that hygienists are embedded in every setting where health happens—not just the traditional four walls of the dental practice. That would be oncology departments, emergency departments, primary care clinics, pediatricians’ offices, home health, wellness centers, gyms,” she added. “What if we brought the care to people where they are? And what if we could break down some of these barriers, hierarchical models, and restrictive practice acts?”

VanGuilder highlighted the ready-made workforce of dental hygienists, noting that many hygienists aren’t practicing, work part-time, or leave the

profession due to limited opportunities.

“There are hygienists out there who are breaking down barriers and trailblazing,” she said, “but it should be much easier.”

RECRUITING AND RETAINING HYGIENE PROFESSIONALS

Many areas of healthcare, including dental hygiene, are experiencing workforce shortages. Some of those can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, but VanGuilder pointed to data that shows the shift in the dental hygiene workforce started earlier. “Hygienists aren’t practicing as long as they used to because of musculoskeletal issues. It’s hard on the body,” she said. She also noted that many hygienists don’t have access to career ladders. “However, with new settings, new career paths, and expanded scope of practice, there are more opportunities.”

The number of hygiene programs in colleges and universities also plays a role in the over- or under-abundance of hygienists in a given region or community, VanGuilder noted. Areas with several dental hygiene programs can wind up with more hygienists than available positions, while areas with few or no programs face a dearth of hygiene professionals to fill open slots.

Addressing this issue falls to individual states. “If they can build a new program at an existing dental school, that’s fantastic,” said VanGuilder. “If they can’t

build a new program, how do we increase the class sizes or offer multiple tracks? Or maybe offer different hours—some nights and weekends. States are stepping up and re-evaluating education.”

The ADHA also continues to work on resolving shortages where they exist.

Hygienist Inspired, a chairside recruitment program created by the ADHA in partnership with the Delta Dental Foundation, has established goals aimed at addressing the workforce shortages, improving access to care, and increasing diversity within the profession so that it reflects the populations being served. The growing program connects future hygienists to pathways for entering the profession, while offering invaluable support every step of the way.

“In some areas we have shortages; in some areas we don’t,” VanGuilder said. “How do we find creative solutions that don’t minimize the standard of care but can expand how many hygienists we have, keep them happy, and keep them in the workforce?”



“Hygiene is the backbone of a dental office. The hygienist is the clinical team member that patients should see the most.”

**Kelsey Dalke, DHSc,
MSDH, RDH**

TECHNOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF PREVENTIVE CARE

Technology continues to change how people work, no matter the profession. VanGuilder sees it as a benefit. “It supports clinical decision-making, time management, patient education—bridging the gap between what we see and what we know so the patient understands it.”

Advocacy in Action: The Hygienist’s Voice

A registered lobbyist for more than three decades, Lancette VanGuilder notes the important role hygienists play in advocating for their patients. “We excel at that,” she said. “However, we haven’t been so great at advocating for ourselves or the profession.”

The ADHA wants hygienists to see themselves as healthcare providers—and to start advocating. “We want to help hygienists find their voice so they can actually shape what the profession looks like in their states and communities,” she said.

To that end, the ADHA has increased its staff and added more portals to its website with access to advocacy toolkits, model legislation, and CE courses. “It’s our job to educate hygienists, so we have tons of resources now to help them find their voices and learn how to use them,” said VanGuilder.

“We know that this is how we’re going to break down those restrictive barriers and how we’re going to expand our scope of practice.” She added that advocacy also supports the creation of new settings where hygienists can provide care and education.

VanGuilder pointed to recent legislation as a call to action. “There’s a lot of legislation popping up in states around the country that we really believe will harm the public,” she said. “If we don’t step up and say that, who else will?”

Kelsey Dalke noted that getting involved doesn’t have to be complicated. “There are plenty of seats at the table,” she said. “Even if you’re copying and pasting an email from the ADHA and forwarding it on to your senator, take the time to do that. You never know if that’s going to hit the right person and actually prompt action.”

Data collection, as described by VanGuilder, is essential to sound clinical decisions.

"Digital tools like intraoral scanners and AI software, along with salivary and A1c testing, all support patient care," she said. "I've used an intraoral camera for years, but if I can use an intraoral camera along with a digital scanner, AI software, and a lab workup of the patient's saliva, my conversations are so much more powerful, our treatment plans are more comprehensive, and patient acceptance goes through the roof."

Dalke described AI as instrumental in bridging the gap between a hygienist's interpretation of a radiograph and a patient's understanding. "It can help patients better understand their diagnostics and their health, and where they stand compared to a healthy mouth," she said.

Technology plays a critical role in the hygiene workflow. For instance, Dalke finds AI-powered voice charting (such as Dentrrix Voice or Ascend Voice) particularly useful. "You're not waiting for someone to help you fill out a perio chart," she said. "It's astronomically life changing."

VanGuilder also pointed to the role of minimally invasive care. "The products that are coming out not only prevent tooth decay, but also allow us to intervene minimally," she said. "We're actually saving our patients money, and if they don't require anesthesia, we might also help to manage their fears."

As prevention and minimally invasive care gain traction, the tools hygienists rely on are evolving alongside them. Products like ACCLEAN from Henry Schein reflect this shift, supporting workflow efficiency and patient comfort while helping clinicians deliver consistent, prevention-focused care and reinforcing their role in protecting patients' health.

The Early Career Advantage

As the role of the dental hygienist evolves, early-career support is becoming increasingly important. My Dental Hygiene Life, an initiative of the ADHA's Industry Relations Council, is designed to guide hygienists from education into practice and beyond.

My Dental Hygiene Life serves as a centralized resource hub for students and newly practicing hygienists, offering guidance on licensure, career planning, continuing education, and professional growth. It also encourages connection: helping clinicians build professional networks, explore leadership opportunities, and engage in advocacy.

By supporting students and newly practicing hygienists, My Dental Hygiene Life reflects a broader shift in the profession that emphasizes growth, engagement, and a more active role in driving the future of oral health.



To learn more, scan the QR code.

RIISING TO THE MOMENT

Recent challenges to the role of the dental hygienist have sparked renewed engagement across the profession, underscoring the need for clinicians to speak up and protect standards of care. In VanGuilder's state of Nevada, a 2025 bill proposed an alternative pathway to licensure that would allow training under a dentist in place of a traditional accredited hygiene program.

"No college education, no formal infection-control training...just on-the-job training," she said. "That proposed bill created a pretty massive dynamic shift in our profession. And I think it's exactly what needed to happen to get us to stand up and ask, 'How do we work with other groups, with organized dentistry, with our corporate partners, with owners of dental

product companies, and with legislators? How can we all work together to get care to more people without minimizing standards?'"

VanGuilder believes some have avoided advocacy because it is often viewed as political. "But we're realizing that politics, healthcare, and just being a human have all collided and we can't separate them anymore."

As the role of the dental hygienist evolves, clinicians are doing far more than cleanings—they are educators, diagnosticians, and advocates, using advanced skills and technology to improve outcomes and expand access to care. By stepping into leadership roles, they are not only protecting the profession's integrity, but also helping redefine oral health for patients everywhere.