

Standout Seven:

Hygienists Making a Difference

These exceptional clinicians exemplify leadership, entrepreneurship, and clinical passion.

How can you tell when a dental hygienist stands out from the pack? Maybe when they say things like this: “I love elevating our profession. I love making things better—leaving things better than they were.” “I want to see the expansion of our license portability, our autonomy as a profession...so that we can actually expand access to care and it is more affordable to patients.” “[Hygienists] need to be everywhere. We need to be in schools...We need to be in long-term care facilities.” In order of appearance, those quotes come from Shelley Brown, MEd, BSDH, RDH, FADHA; Lesley Harbison, MS, RDH, EPDH, FADHA; and Dani Ford, MHA, RDH—three of the American Dental Hygienists’ Association (ADHA) Standout Seven, sponsored by ACCLEAN by Henry Schein.

The Standout Seven also includes Wanda Cloet, DHSC, RDH; Tiffani Dickey, RDH, MBA, BS, FADHA, CLC; Andrea Edelen, BS, RDH; and Melia Lewis, RDH, FADHA.

Each of these hygienists has traveled a different professional path with individual goals, but ultimately they all enjoy careers focused on improving the health of their communities through clinical expertise and advocacy. The Standout Seven, as stated in the preamble to the ADHA Code of Ethics for Dental Hygienists, are “devoted to the prevention of disease and the promotion and improvement of the public’s health.”

ACCESS TO CARE: A TOP PRIORITY

The ADHA Code’s standards of professional responsibility include a call to “promote access to dental hygiene services for all,

supporting justice and fairness in the distribution of healthcare resources.” Much of the work of the Standout Seven answers that call.

Dani Ford, for example, serves as the program manager for school-based and mobile dental programs at Denver Health Hospital in Denver, CO. Ford’s clinical rotation at Indian Health Services and the VA hospital in Northern Wyoming triggered her desire to work in community health. “I fell in love with the VA hospital,” Ford explained. “I thought, I can work in a hospital system and see patients in an outpatient clinic. This is really cool. And the Indian Health Services was really appealing because it was a humongous, beautiful clinic with integration of their medical and dental system.”

Tiffani Dickey grew up in a rural area with limited access to care. “I didn’t have the option of seeing a pediatric dentist,” she said.



Dickey now works as a full-time clinical dental hygienist and clinical operations manager at Pediatric Dentistry of Sunset Hills in St. Louis, MO. She's also president-elect of the Missouri Dental Hygienists' Association, and she's the first hygienist to serve on the board of Give Kids a Smile. "I volunteer twice a year, every year with Give Kids a Smile," said Dickey. "I'm so proud of being able to serve a community that doesn't have access to care...to be able to make those life-changing appointments."

As part of their training, students in the dental hygiene program at Central Community College in Hastings, NE, where Wanda Cloet serves as director, deliver care to patients in the local area. "We're providing care in our rural area, where a lot of patients can't get care in dental offices." The students also provide public health support, including to residents of a long-term care facility and children in schools and Head Start. "I can talk to [the students] about this need," said Cloet. "But when they're in the trenches and they see the need, they really get it. They understand how much these patients need us and how much we can do for them."

Shelley Brown, an educator at the Utah College of Dental Hygiene,



Wanda Cloet, DHSC, RDH

*Dental Hygiene Program Director at
Central Community College*

What are you passionate about?

"I wanted to be an educator from the beginning. My goal was always to be an educator and I've been one for over 40 years."

What do you see as the future of hygiene and preventive care?

"We've always known that prevention is the key. And now we have some products that focus on that and treat early decay."

What are you most proud of?

"Providing opportunities to my students, exposing them to all the possibilities within the profession, and ensuring they know everything they need to know about licensure and our Compact...and what's going on at ADHA."

launched Homebound Smiles in 2020. "That was the product of a lot of work by our legislative committee here in Utah, our Utah Dental Hygienists' Association," said Brown. "They helped to pass legislation that allows dental hygienists to work in public health settings independently. Originally, the hygienists worked in collaboration with a dentist, but a couple of years ago that feature was removed. Obviously, we still work collaboratively with a dentist—that's so important. But I don't need to have a stamp of approval before I see a patient to do things within my scope of practice."

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: ROLES BEYOND THE CHAIRSIDE

Under its Standards and Professional Responsibility, the ADHA Code states, "Assert our own interests in ways that are fair and equitable." For many of the Standout Seven, entrepreneurship is one way to do exactly that—creating new paths for impact, flexibility, and growth within the profession.

Melia Lewis, for instance, works in a private practice in Utah while also operating two businesses: Acuti Sharpening and Hygiene Edge.

At Acuti Sharpening, "we get instruments from all over the country sent to us," Lewis said. "We sharpen them and also perform assessments to determine if they need to be retired. I love this business because it's been such a great opportunity to support hygienists in a different way... Instruments are the backbone of what we do all day."



Shelley Brown, MEd, BSDH, RDH, FADHA

Educator at the Utah College of Dental Hygiene and owner of Homebound Smiles

What are you passionate about?

"I didn't plan on becoming a public health provider, but caring for underserved populations is where my passion truly lies. Through Homebound Smiles, I bring preventive and minimally invasive dentistry directly to patients who might otherwise go without, and I value the autonomy to make decisions that best serve their needs."

What do you see as the future of hygiene and preventive care?

"We'll see more hygienists practicing independently in all settings as well as homes, hospitals, schools, and mobile care programs."

What are you most proud of?

"Homebound Smiles is a huge accomplishment, but I'm also proud to support educators through HYGIENE edgeUCATORS, an online platform where we share content to strengthen the next generation of hygienists. My goal is to make high-quality educational tools accessible to all dental professionals."

Lewis' other business, Hygiene Edge, focuses on education. "It's an online source of education," she explained. "We do tons of helpful videos and work with different brands to help them with their product launches. But the heart of it is definitely education and teaching through helpful tips and tricks. We aim to make clinical life a little easier...supporting clinicians, inspiring them."

Brown's mobile practice, Homebound Smiles, is a story of entrepreneurship rooted in expanding access to care. "I'm a one-woman show," said Brown. "I can see kiddos in schools and a few other public health settings, but

mostly I've been seeing patients in long-term care facilities or their homes if they're considered homebound or non-ambulatory."

Lesley Harbison previously operated a mobile hygiene practice serving older adults and patients with significant barriers to care. Now a full-time associate professor at Pacific University in Oregon, she views that experience as a defining part of her career. "I ran that business for two or three years," she said. "I was an entrepreneur!"

EDUCATION: PREPARING FUTURE HYGIENISTS

The concept of education makes a few appearances in the

ADHA Code. For example, with respect to a hygienist's responsibility to self as a professional, it states, "Enhance professional competencies through continuous learning in order to practice according to high standards of care."

And among the list of responsibilities to the dental hygiene profession, the Code calls on hygienists to "promote a framework of professional education that develops dental hygiene competencies to meet the oral and overall health needs of the public."

All of the Standout Seven place a high priority on their own education, while some have also chosen careers as educators.

After graduating from the University of Vermont in Burlington with an associate degree in dental hygiene, Harbison first moved to Oregon, where

she practiced in a periodontal office for a number of years, and then to Arizona. "When we moved to Arizona, I knew I wanted to start expanding my education," Harbison explained. "When we moved back to Oregon, I received my bachelor's degree from the Oregon Institute of Technology. I also became interested in independent practice, so I got a master's in dental hygiene, focused on education."

An associate professor at Pacific University, Harbison teaches both didactic and clinical courses in radiology, pharmacology, special needs, and restorative dentistry. She also has an interest in research. Her master's thesis focused on geriatric patient care, and currently she's doing work related to mental health and burnout among clinicians. "I love the topics of emotional intelligence

and empathetic patient care," said Harbison. "Those were things I loved as a clinician...and are important to patient-centered care."

About 200 miles away in Nebraska, Cloet has served as the dental hygiene program director at Central Community College for over 35 years. She graduated from Wichita State University, where they offered associate's and bachelor's degrees in dental hygiene. She earned both, with a concentration in education.

"I wanted to be an educator from the beginning," said Cloet. "I spent only a couple of years in private practice. My goal was always to be an educator. I started teaching when I was 25 years old. I was younger than some of my students."

She went on to earn her master's from the University of Nebraska and a doctorate in health science from A.T. Still University.

In her role as program director, Cloet aims to provide students with as many opportunities as possible. Remembering her experience at Wichita State, she developed a similar program at Central—originally in collaboration with the University of South Dakota but now with the University of New Mexico—which allows students to attain their associate's and bachelor's degrees at the same time.

Other opportunities Cloet provides to her students include access to the latest technology. "We were the first program in the state, even before the dental schools, to have the endoscope," said Cloet. In addition, students have the chance to provide care within the community. The rural area presents barriers to care, she noted, "so we provide a lot of care in our clinic."

In fact, the clinic recently received a thank-you note from a patient. "During the extraoral exam, the hygienist found something and referred the patient to



Tiffani Dickey, RDH, MBA, BS, FADHA, CLC

Clinical Operations Manager at Pediatric Dentistry of Sunset Hills

What are you passionate about?

"I found my passion for pediatric dentistry while working at a community health center in a rural area. I guess I just had a touch. I ended up getting all the pediatric patients, which I loved. I could relate to them, get them to not be so scared, and get them more excited about coming to the dentist."

What do you see as the future of hygiene and preventive care?

"The whole body connection. When we look at the whole patient, we can uncover underlying issues. There can be multiple reasons why a child might have high caries risk. We want to figure out the root cause, how we can treat it, and how we can help prevent it in the future."

What are you most proud of?

"Working with the kiddos, including through Give Kids a Smile as a volunteer clinician and on the board. I'm very proud of being involved with the community and Give Kids a Smile."

her physician," said Cloet. "Both the patient and the physician thanked us for being so thorough in our oral cancer exams."

LEADERSHIP: GUIDING PATIENTS AND THE PROFESSION

The ADHA Code asks hygienists to "conduct professional activities and programs and develop relationships in ways that are honest, responsible, open, and candid." It also calls for constructive management of conflict, respect of employee and employer rights,

and participation in the development and advancement of the profession. All of these statements speak to dental hygienists' role as leaders—at the chairside, within professional organizations, in administrative positions, and as role models for new-to-practice hygienists.

Without a doubt, the Standout Seven serve as leaders within the profession. Those leadership roles take various forms, but each serves as an example of professionalism, an innovative mindset, and a passion for patient care.

Ford was tapped for her position at Denver Health because her leadership skills caught the eye of an executive at the organization. "The administrator at the time, who wasn't a clinician, was leaving. They wanted to replace her with a clinician," explained Ford. "[An organization executive] said to me, 'I see something in you. I see some potential in you. I think you need to be a leader in this organization.'"

Ford now manages oral health operations in eight of the 19 medical clinics located in Denver public schools and an oral screening and sealant program that serves over 50 schools.

"I oversee the two teams of dental hygienists and administrative staff, which include patient navigators and operations support," explained Ford. "[All of the oral care] is done by hygienists, because in Colorado we have quite a bit of autonomy."

Andrea Edelen serves as another example of hygienist leadership. Her position as director of dental hygiene and clinical support at Mortenson Dental Partners, a DSO with 150 locations, began out of her curiosity and interest in being more involved. "I would say, 'Hey, can I get involved in this? Can I help out here?'"

Edelen began mentoring other hygienists new to the DSO, helping to support and onboard them. "From there, I moved into a mentor role, and then I started as a hygiene director," she said. In that role, she oversaw all hygiene initiatives. She then moved into operations and her current position.

"I'm really involved in supporting hygienists and new grads," Edelen



**Andrea Edelen,
BS, RDH**

*Director of Dental Hygiene and
Clinical Support, Mortenson Dental Partners*

What are you passionate about?

"My 'why' is helping people, serving people. Even in the position I'm in now, I'm helping patients, but in a different way. I'm very driven by serving and patient care, even though my hands aren't in the mouth."

What do you see as the future of hygiene and preventive care?

"Looking beyond caries risk to factors such as social determinants of health, behavioral health...[the patient] as a whole person. I think that's where prevention is headed, which truly is opening a whole world for hygienists outside of fluoride and sealants."

What are you most proud of?

"I received the LOVE Award [a peer-nominated award at Mortenson]. It's about our core values. Our mission statement is to improve the lives of others by living our values every day. It felt so good to receive that award. I'm also proud of our response during COVID. We organized so quickly and adapted so well to the many changes. That was unbelievable."



Lesley Harbison, MS, RDH, EPDH, FADHA

Associate Professor at
Pacific University

What are you passionate about?

"I love the topics of emotional intelligence and empathy in patient care. Those were things...that were important to me as a clinician and in providing person-centered care—listening to them, treating them uniquely and with empathy."

What do you see as the future of hygiene and preventive care?

"There's a lot happening in the world of preventive care. [I like what's] happening with license portability and expanding of the scope of practice for dental assistants and dental hygienists. Teledentistry is another big piece. I think the convergence of affordability for patients, the clinician shortage, and a desire for autonomy will influence the traditional preventative care model."

What are you most proud of?

"I tend to be a worrier, but I know that just stepping out and doing new things and experiencing new challenges helps you realize, 'Oh, I guess I can do that. That's fun.' Just saying 'yes' to unknowns over and over again [has led] to becoming president of the Oregon Dental Hygienists' Association, authoring a book chapter, and speaking nationally."

explained. "I also help to roll out new products and technology. We work through the learning curve. We try to anticipate what will be challenging and what we can put into place to make work easier."

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

When asked about the future of the dental hygiene profession and preventive care, the Standout Seven spoke about care access, expanded function, and innovative products.

Edelen pointed out that the current scope of practice is somewhat narrow, but she sees it expanding.

She expects risk assessments, for instance, to go beyond just evaluating caries risk—taking into account social factors, patient behaviors, and overall health. "I think that's where prevention is headed, which truly is opening a whole world for hygienists to think outside of fluoride and sealants—which have been life-changing, but there's more to it," she said.

In her role with the Missouri Dental Hygienists' Association, Dickey has been involved in advocacy and legislative work. "Our ongoing focus is advancing the profession," she said. "We promote opportunities for dental hygienists to practice to the full scope



Melia Lewis, RDH, FADHA

Clinical hygienist at Aspen Heights Dental in Utah, co-founder of Hygiene Edge, and owner/operator of Acuti Sharpening

What are you passionate about?

"Learning new things, for example at a conference, and then taking them back to the practice the next day. It makes it so much fun and enjoyable. When I'm happy, I feel like I'm a better clinician."

What do you see as the future of hygiene and preventive care?

"I would love to see prevention go outside of the traditional practice, lots of education, and meeting patients where they are...schools, nursing homes, community centers."

What are you most proud of?

"Creating Hygiene Edge and helping to mentor others. That's very rewarding and very fun. The burnout rate for hygiene is high, so it's been rewarding to talk to individual hygienists and clinicians and help them figure out what's working and what isn't. I'm also proud of those moments when I've made a difference for an individual patient. A couple of weeks ago, I did an oral cancer screening and noted a weird area. A biopsy came back positive. That's not life-changing for me, but it is for the patient. It's fun to make those connections and help support their overall health."

of their licensure without unnecessary restrictions."

Dickey also highlighted the growing emphasis on airway health in both research and practice. "We can catch orthodontic and airway issues earlier when everything is still developing," she explained. "I screen every patient. When patients are particularly young, we can look for habits that may lead to problems later. It's a more holistic approach."

Many of the Standout Seven talked about moving outside of the traditional practice structure. "It's really hard sometimes for patients to come into a clinic that's only open from 9 to 5, Monday through Thursday," said Lewis. "I would love to see prevention go outside of the traditional practice—lots of education, just meeting patients where they are, potentially providing screenings, fluoride, and other preventive treatments."

Brown also envisions dental hygienists working outside of traditional offices. "I see them working separately," she said. "Just like you go to a physical therapist separate from your physician."

Brown and other Standout Seven hygienists discussed innovative products now available for non-invasive caries management that they see as game-changers in preventive care.

"If we can get a little more time and a little more reimbursement for these types of preventive services, we could prevent more caries," said Brown.

Harbison agreed about the products' potential. "I wrote an article about povidone-iodine and how it can be used—simple,



Dani Ford, MHA, RDH

Program Manager for School-Based and Mobile Dental Programs at Denver Health Hospital

What are you passionate about?

"I'm super passionate about being more creative in bringing care to our patients and triaging things and trying to keep them in our clinics until restorative care is absolutely needed—and providing as much care as we can while they're with us. I love to do more with less and say 'yes' when others say it's not possible."

What do you see as the future of hygiene and preventive care?

"[Hygienists] need to be everywhere. We need to be providing education to other healthcare providers about how to look at things earlier and catch things earlier before they get worse. I love minimally invasive care. I'm all about silver diamine fluoride and doing glass ionomer fillings."

What are you most proud of?

"I love talking about my virtual dental home program. I'm unbelievably proud of it. I love educating people on how you do more with less and how you can bring care to them and get them in the seat they need to be in when they need to be in it. I've also been working really hard to help elevate other hygienists in the organization...we created a hygiene advisory council. I'm just their leadership liaison—I want them to drive this work."

over-the-counter, effective—not a miracle," she said. "Silver diamine fluoride also is great and used synergistically with other products. They make a big difference. That stuff gets me excited."

Edelen described guided enamel regeneration as "changing the game. We can now treat incipient decay instead of watching it."

COURAGE IN ACTION

Ultimately, the Standout Seven see a bright future for the dental

hygiene profession and the patients they serve, and their drive inspires other hygienists—and those considering entering the profession—to envision a career full of possibility. While they have all faced challenges and moments of doubt in their efforts to make a difference, they continued pushing forward.

"I'm the most scared brave person ever," said Harbison. "It's like I tell my daughter, 'What you do is, you do the scary thing.'"

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