

Esther M. Wilkins, BS, RDH, DMD

A Mentor and Icon in Dental Hygiene

By **Christine A. Hovliaras-Delozier, RDH, BS, MBA**

As dental hygiene students, we studied *Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist*, which, in my opinion in the early 1980s when I was a dental hygiene student, was the "Bible of dental hygiene." As a student reading chapter after chapter, I said to myself, "Who is this woman, Dr. Esther Wilkins, a dental hygienist, a dentist, and a periodontist? This is a woman who must have done it all in her career."

Today, I know Dr. Wilkins on a professional level and have the utmost respect for her as a thought leader and mentor who continues to inspire dental hygienists with her knowledge and expertise in dental hygiene and dentistry. As she told me in the following interview, "Dental hygienists call me for advice, Christine. Today, a dental hygiene educator contacted me to ask my opinion on a dental hygiene subject." In my opinion, that is the ultimate compliment for a mentor. But Wilkins is more than an authority on oral health care. She is a person who is jovial and fun to be around. Those of us who have attended dental hygiene meetings with her know that she is a great dancer who loves to socialize with her colleagues and will always spare a moment to be photographed with the students who admire her.

Early Professional Life

Wilkins told me, "As a high school student, I had no idea what I wanted to do, and when I was a senior, my older sister – my first and ever mentor – sat me down and said, 'Come on now, you have got to go to college next year. What are you going to do?' with a bit of an attitude. So we decided I'd be a nurse, and I started out on that career path, but ended up a science major at Simmons College for women in Boston."

While pursuing her degree at Simmons, Wilkins took an elective lecture course in public health. In one lecture, her professor talked about the many types of healthcare workers including the dental hygienist. She asked him where dental hygienists were educated. The Forsyth School was very near Simmons, and at lunchtime that day she went to inquire about application. After completing her science degree at Simmons she enrolled in dental hygiene at the Forsyth School and earned her certificate in 1939.

Wilkins practiced dental hygiene in the office of Dr. Frank Willis, a general dentist. The team also worked in a school clinic part-time, which, she told me, "was very preventive oriented." While practicing as a successful dental hygiene professional, she realized that she wanted to become a dentist. When Wilkins told Willis that she wanted to go to dental school, she said, "He was not happy.

He practically blew the roof off!" She practiced for six years full-time in Willis' practice and then part-time for four years as she pursued her doctorate in dentistry, which she earned from Tufts School of Dental Medicine in 1949. Willis "never could find" a dental hygienist after Wilkins left to go to dental school until she finally graduated. She said, "He was helping me, you see. He was allowing me to have my position with him to earn money for college." It appears that Willis and Wilkins had a collaborative working relationship.

Being the Advocate for Advanced Dental Hygiene Education

In 1950, Wilkins single-handedly started the University of Washington Dental Hygiene School Program, which began in September with eight dental hygiene students. As director of the program, she developed the curriculum and taught a majority of the courses at first. After being the director for more than 10 years, she decided to go back to Tufts School of Dental Medicine to pursue her periodontology specialty certificate which she completed in 1964. After graduating the two-year program, she began to teach in the Periodontology Department where she still teaches beginning periodontal instrumentation for second-year dental students. During that same period she developed and presented continuing education courses for dental hygienists.

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Over the years since then, she has presented over 750 courses in all of the United States, Canada, and several countries around the world.

Wilkins has loved being an educator, and she encourages other dental hygiene professionals to pursue this as a career opportunity. One important thing she shared with me was the need "to have at least a bachelor of science degree to start and then work toward your master's degree." She reflected upon the opportunities that education has provided her: to network and socialize with many knowledgeable people, visit dental hygiene schools, provide value and education to her students. "I didn't originally know how to teach, and I'll never forget my first lecture ever. Anyway, I was terrible. I was scared, but once you get up there, you have to forget yourself and think only of your audience."

"If you are a student in an associate degree program, I encourage [you] to continue, and pursue [your] bachelor's degree," she advised, " and then move on to your master's degree. Even before becoming an educator, you must read, read, read, and keep up with the current research and literature."

Wilkins also emphasized becoming a member of the American Dental Hygienists' Association: join the organization and go to the meetings. "No man is an island, 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. Join the fluoridation cause for yours or a neighboring community.

Mentoring, Lifelong Learning and the ADHP

"I have mentored a lot of people, Christine, which include students at all different levels, educators, clinicians, and pre-dental hygiene people who are considering dental hygiene as a career," Wilkins told me. "I am also mentoring practicing dental hygienists who may be thinking of going to dental school. I do not intend to discourage them, but I want to be sure of their objectives before encouraging them. I tell them of the many opportunities in dental hygiene, especially related to the Advanced Dental Hygiene Practitioner credential.

Continuing to learn, encouraging everyone to advance their education, and the big step toward the ADHP are, she feels, important steps to success for dental hygiene. She added that the ADHP curriculum needs to contain an emphasis on periodontal diseases and total systemic health.

I asked Wilkins how we can make the dentists and specialists feel more comfortable with the ADHP credential. She was very honest: "Many dental colleagues I have talked with are closed-minded about it. I say to them: "Look at the nurse, the RN that's a nurse practitioner. Don't you have faith in them?" Wilkins spoke about how her late husband who always talked about his nurse practitioner (NP) when he was ill. Her husband talked to the NP more than the physician. Like the NP, we have dental hygienists practicing in the periodontal area. We have ones in cancer therapy. There are at least a couple of hygienists who have cancer nursing degrees and dental hygiene degrees." She made a great point about how many of our dental hygiene colleagues are specialists in different areas of dentistry (e.g., oral cancer, pedodontics, periodontics, public health, and others), which in her mind is a positive progression for dental hygiene and the estab-

lishment of the ADHP. "We can have an ADHP for all different phases of dentistry. For those hygienists who are interested in pursuing the ADHP credential, she advises them, "Be sure not to stay in a dead-end job with a dentist who limits the time for patient care, who limits a budget on new things, who hires only part-timers so he/she doesn't have to provide insurance or benefits. Don't stay in those dead-end jobs. Get ambitious yourself, and move." "Look at the dental therapists in Australia and the United Kingdom," I said. She answered, "I know, they are doing a peaceful, quiet job, and the dentists don't want to do it anyway."



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Significant Changes in the Dental Hygiene Profession

Over the years, the scope of practice has changed in more than 40 states across the country, allowing dental hygienists to provide local anesthesia. Various state practice acts have changed to permit dental hygienists to monitor nitrous oxide administration, practice in nursing homes, make house calls to elderly patients at home, and conduct restorative responsibilities. We need strength in numbers in order to accomplish the strategies that ADHA wants to achieve in the next 5-10 years and continue to move the dental hygiene profession forward to meet the oral health care needs of the public. We need every dental hygienist to become a

member of ADHA so that we can be sure these positive changes will continue.

Wilkins said that she has seen an endless list of

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Attending the ADHA CLL/AS in Albuquerque, New Mexico?

New Program: "Are You Smarter than Esther Wilkins?"

In a take-off on "Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?," student dental hygienists will have the opportunity to test their dental hygiene knowledge in a quiz-show format. Esther M. Wilkins, BS, RDH, DMD's textbook has been a rite of passage for dental hygiene education for decades, inspiring the name of this fun event. The event will be held at the upcoming Center for Lifelong Learning/ADHA Annual Session in Albuquerque, N.M., on Friday, June 20, from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. Please go to ADHA's Web site at www.adha.org to find out more about the meeting and to register online.

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changes that have occurred in the profession of dental hygiene. "It is a different field altogether," she said. "There are all kinds of diagnostic aids, we have wonderful new instruments and ultrasonics, which we didn't have years ago. I used to scale to the bottom of pockets, and I didn't even have an endoscope to see if I really got it all out. The equipment, everything is so much more patient- and user-friendly."

We talked about patients' attitudes toward oral health, and she felt that advertisements and the things patients see and read on the Internet help them to learn more about their oral health. "The patient has a lot more opportunity to learn, and it's our responsibility as dental hygienists in practice to teach them even more."

Wilkins said that some hygienists have told her they have patients who question the use of fluoride and want to know how to answer them. "I tell them to be clear with the facts, especially to mention that fluoridation was acclaimed one of the top ten wonders in public health during the last century along with vaccinations for smallpox, poliomyelitis, and the many other deadly or deforming communicable diseases.

Her Book and Her Busy Career Schedule

Wilkins' 10th edition of *Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist* is published and available for purchase. Wilkins is very excited about this edition. Its cover is red; I actually have the 1984 version with the green cover.

The success behind this famous textbook is that it is planned and written for the beginner dental hygienist and the format is friendly for the reader. More than 90% of educators in the United States and globally use Wilkins' book in their dental hygiene curricula. It is also published in Japanese, Italian, Portuguese, Canadian French and Korean. I look forward to purchasing her latest edition. Please visit www.lww.com and find "Esther Wilkins" under that.

These days, Wilkins is traveling, teaching dental students (at Tufts) the care and use of nonsurgical periodontal instruments, providing continuing education to dental professionals, attending pinning ceremonies and giving speeches to graduating students, attending professional meetings, networking with her colleagues, and being involved on a few editorial advisory boards for different publications. Wilkins is a mentor and has helped many dental hygienists in the profession to become more knowledgeable and astute in their positions. She enjoys life to the fullest and really loves people and having fun. I want to thank Dr. Esther Wilkins for taking the time out of her schedule to share her story with me for our *Access* readers. ■