

Personal Profile: Mike Wheeler

President of the British Dental Hygienists' Association

Dave O'Malley, Assistant Publications Officer



Mike Wheeler's position in the dental world is certainly unique. Unusually for a practising dental hygienist, he is also Dental Development Manager for Somerset Primary Care Trust (PCT), and is involved with a variety of education projects. He also recently became the first male to hold the post of president of the British Dental Hygienists' Association (BDHA). Team in Practice contacted him to ask about his extraordinary career, and his views on what the future holds for DCPs.

Hygiene is key to prevention

Mike took over the presidency of the BDHA in November, and is looking forward to the tasks ahead. "At the moment", he says, "we face some incredible challenges. The role of the dental hygienist has become paramount in the prevention of dental disease".

The crucial word here is of course 'prevention'. Many medical business models have in the past centred on treatment, and prevention has sometimes been overlooked. However, the priorities of a dental care service have changed: there are now fewer and fewer patients requiring invasive treatment, and the focus of the profession is now shifting back to prevention, perhaps more than ever before. For example, following the review of dental recall intervals by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, and the subsequent guidance published in October 2004, the concept of routine universal six-monthly oral health reviews (checkups) has been felt to be inappropriate. The dental hygienist is now free to perform oral health reviews and determine the necessary follow-up interval based on their assessment. Mike is pleased to note that many patients, too, now expect a more preventive approach. "People looking for a dentist will probably look through the *Yellow Pages*, and when they see a practice with a dental hygienist, that's where they tend to go," he remarks.

The changing landscape of dentistry and the needs of its patients has resulted in an increasing reliance on the work of DCPs. Mike has

been Dental Development Manager for South Somerset PCT (recently incorporated into Somerset PCT) over the past two years, most of which was at a time when many PCTs did not have a dental lead. Now that PCTs have been given fuller control of their dental budget, Mike is responsible for commissioning the Trust's dental work out to dental practices and clinics. "I don't think the methods of working will change much", says Mike, "but what will change is the way people's skills are used".

Key Skills for DCPs

Mike is part of the FGDP(UK)'s working group to develop an assessment for DCPs in the seven Key Skills (see Sally Hunter's article opposite for more details). This assessment, which leads to the award of a certificate for successful completion, has been available for some time to dentists as part of the MFGDP(UK) coursework module. Following on from the success of the *Key Skills in Primary Dental Care* e-learning package as a team training tool, DCPs will now have the opportunity to demonstrate their own knowledge and understanding of the key skills as well as their relevance to maintaining high standards in the working environment. As Mike puts it, "The same sets of rules apply to all dental professionals—there are no double standards". Unlike dentists, however, DCPs will be able to gain individual certificates for each of the skills most relevant to them. As mandatory continuing professional development (CPD) for DCPs

approaches, the certification available through the *Key Skills* e-learning programme will prove invaluable. According to Mike, "The *Key Skills* package now represents a solid training programme for all dental professionals".

The continuing education of dental professionals permeates almost every aspect of Mike's work. In addition to his role with the BDHA and Somerset PCT, he is also Project Lead for Outreach Dental Training for the Birmingham and Bristol Dental Schools. The project accredits teaching practices where dental undergraduates can gain experience of working in a clinical environment, and also develops their skills in dealing with patients face-to-face. As well as bringing dental care to where it is needed most, the project provides dental undergraduates with a hands-on opportunity to develop primary care skills in a primary care setting.

In July 2006 the General Dental Council extended its register to include dental nurses, technicians, orthodontic therapists, and clinical dental technicians, and Mike hopes that registration will bring with it greater access to CPD and better prospects for professional training. He sees it as an opportunity for these groups to expand their roles within the dental team, adding that, for dental nurses in particular, the change is "long overdue".

Occupation: therapy

Understandably, though, Mike is particularly excited about the opportunities afforded to hygienists. The new role of the orthodontic therapist, he feels, may be the key to increasing the availability of orthodontic care to patients in the future, and expects most of their numbers to come from within the hygienist population, as "dental hygienists already have most of the skills required (to become a therapist)".

(Continued on page 12)

For more information about the BDHA, visit www.bdha.org.uk.

Keep it moving

bad
t the
asily be

re a
aded
d help
ental

the
dvising
caused
the
sional

nd
n
ms

Practice Innovations Meeting
Henry Schein and Smile-on Ltd
9 March 2007, London
Contact 020 7232 0027 or sales@henryschein.co.uk.

FGDP(UK) Yorkshire Division Masterclass 2007:
"Emotional and Facial Support among the Dentally
Depleted"
9 March 2007, Cedar Court Hotel, Bradford
See www.fgdpyorkshire.org.uk.

FGDP(UK) Southwest Thames Division:
"80 is the new 60"
13 March 2007, Guildford Postgraduate Centre.
Contact 01483 571 122, extension 4381.

Conference for Dental Care Professionals:
New Horizons & Responsibilities and Opportunities
Faculty of Dental Surgery, Royal College of Surgeons
of Edinburgh
17 March 2007, Edinburgh
Contact dental@rcsed.ac.uk or 0131 527 1608.

Personal Profile: Mike Wheeler

Continued from page 7

Mike is also keen to see a "top-up" course in dental therapy for hygienists, which would allow the development of additional skills without the time and expense demanded by a full training programme in dental therapy. Many dental hygienists are in fact also qualified dental therapists, and Mike is concerned that not enough people fully understand the role of these dual-qualified professionals. "Of course," he notes, "there will always be a large demand for single-qualified hygienists, as there will always be a need for their advanced periodontal skills in practice."

As with any change in working practices, the process of transferring skills and responsibilities to DCPs requires a period of adjustment for everyone; as DCPs acquire new skills, dentists are learning to make use of them by referring cases on to their team members. Mike is confident that general dental practitioners will embrace the new opportunities for broader working practices. "I think that dentists are a very cost-effective people and would be quick to recognise the benefits, both to the patient and the business, of an expanded clinical role for appropriately trained dental hygienists and other team members. The message is: if you have a practice with four qualified dentists, you probably don't need another dentist; you need a dental hygienist."