

Workplace Wellness



Building a Culture of Respect and Civility in the Dental Office

by Crystal Taylor, Founder & CEO of Ebony Consulting

Since the 1900s, the dental hygiene profession has been dominated by Caucasian women.^{1,2} Today, more than 97% of Canada's dental hygienists identify as female.³⁻⁶ One result of this has been the institutionalization of a patriarchal power structure in which dental hygienists are seen as subservient to dentists. Another is frequent reports of discrimination based on sex and gender identity.^{3,7-10}

In the last 30 years, much recognition has been given to the uniquely female contributions to historically female-dominated health care professions.⁴ Educational institutions have, instead, worked to recruit students of ethnically diverse backgrounds.^{11,12}

At the same time, ongoing efforts by policy makers have sought to reduce the complex barriers to oral health care experienced by some segments of Canada's population.^{2,11,13-16} Dental offices and their clientele are becoming more reflective of Canada's cultural diversity. It is imperative that all dental hygienists be responsive to these changes.



INSPIRING A CULTURE OF RESPECT AND CIVILITY

As the diversity of their clientele grows, dental hygienists have an opportunity to learn and exercise culturally sensitive communication; foster a respect for differences; and provide culturally competent care. By applying these standards of practice to workplace relations, dental hygienists can also become true change agents by building a culture of respect and civility in the dental office. Here's how:

GAINING PERSPECTIVE

As clients and workforces begin to reflect Canada's growing diversity, dental hygienists should:

- ▶ Consider the sociocultural and political contexts of an individual's daily experiences.¹⁷
- ▶ Find opportunities to shift conscious and unconscious biases.
- ▶ Consider the unintended meaning of body language or turns of phrase.

SELF-REFLECTION

Through meaningful self-reflection, dental hygienists can ensure they aren't perpetuating outdated power structures or engaging in incivility by:

- ▶ Considering how their actions may affect others.
- ▶ Recognizing different backgrounds, experiences, and opinions as strengths.
- ▶ Admitting wrongdoing and saying sorry with sincerity.

INSPIRING OTHERS

Dental hygienists can inspire a respectful, healthy workplace by:

- Recognizing and combatting workplace incivility.
- Setting the tone for appropriate workplace behaviour.
- Not making excuses for another person's bad behaviour.
- Knowing their rights and the tools available in the workplace.



WHAT'S AT RISK?

The negative impact of workplace incivility is indisputable.¹⁸ For clients, it can undermine ongoing efforts to combat dental health disparities. For professionals, it can lead to increased sick leave, psychological distress, turnover, and medical errors.^{19,20}

As models of and advocates for respect and civility, dental hygienists are poised to become strategic leaders in the necessary work to inspire real, meaningful growth industry-wide.

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