



Preparing To Be a Registered Dental Hygienist: Instructor and Student Perspectives

by Leslie Battersby, CDA, BDS, PID, MHS • battersby@cnc.bc.ca
and Aria Kensley, RDH • aria.terrace@yahoo.ca

Editor's note: An abbreviated version of this article was published in the fall/winter 2020 issue of *Oh Canada!* magazine. The following is the full text.

The College of New Caledonia's (CNC) dental hygiene program, located in Prince George, British Columbia (BC), began its first intake in 1987. Since then it has been graduating safe, competent, entry-level dental hygienists who have been well sought after by many employers throughout BC. This article offers both an instructor's perspective on teaching and preparing students for graduation, and a new graduate's perspective on her journey from student to registered dental hygienist working in private practice.

INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVE

As a faculty member in CNC's dental hygiene program, I have educated and prepared students for a career as registered dental hygienists for many years. Sometimes I find myself wondering how the students will adjust once working in the real world. What type of dental hygienists will they become? It seems some students can hardly wait to graduate, while others are apprehensive to leave and start working. Some students are very confident in their newly acquired knowledge and kinetic skills, while others need constant reminding of their proven capabilities. On the first day of orientation week in September each year, I meet all the new students and wonder what will become of their incoming class. I contemplate who will stand out as the top clinician, the top academic, the critical thinker, the problem solver, the "mother hen," the outspoken one, the quiet one or the one who may have various challenges along the way. Overall, though, as an educator, I want to help each student succeed and become the best dental hygienist they can be. To accomplish this, I spend many extra hours preparing new lesson plans, finding updated evidence-based articles, preparing assignments and exams, and providing clinical remediation teaching times for various students when required.

At times, I have wondered if all of the extra work is worth it. Then graduation day comes and I see all of those beaming faces, huge smiles, and skilled students. Suddenly,

I forget about all the extra time I spent teaching and preparing them and I remember why I love teaching and the journey each academic year brings. When students later share some of their "real life" experiences in private practice and how much they love providing client care, it really makes me feel like I made a difference in their education and their life. It solidifies all the hard decisions faculty sometimes need to make each year in order for students to succeed in the program, such as assigning unsuccessful grades even when you know it will bring about student tears, or adding extra requirements to a struggling student's clinical term in order for him or her to demonstrate competency. It all becomes so relevant and worthwhile when a new graduate displays confidence in their clinical skills. One such student was Aria Kensley, a student from the 2019 graduating class. She emailed me four months after graduating from the CNC dental hygiene program with her narrative on completing a very difficult debridement requiring local anesthesia. The following is her perspective on her journey through the program and how she was able to confidently apply her knowledge and skills in a private practice as a newly registered dental hygienist.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: STARTING THE PROGRAM

The news of my acceptance into the CNC dental hygiene program was one of the most exciting and terrifying moments of my adult life. As a single mother, I had already been faced with some unique and trying hurdles when I began my postsecondary education. However, it was during this time that I adopted a mantra I believed would help me to attain my educational goals. It's a quote from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, which you are likely familiar with: "That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger." As cliché as it sounds, those words helped me a lot.

My first semester in the dental hygiene program was a blur. I found it to be a huge challenge to balance being a single parent with the intense demands of the program. At one point, I remember having a cassette placed before me with a large assortment of dental hygiene instruments. Our instructor described each instrument in detail, highlighting all of the minor differences that made each one unique and specific. Afterwards my instructor continued her lecture by

explaining the curves of working ends and pointed out all of the different angles and cutting edges. As you can guess, the information was flowing in one ear and gushing right out the other. We were then informed that we would be expected to identify the names and specific uses of every one of our instruments in a clinical examination. The labels of our instruments would be covered in tape for this exam. When I heard this piece of news, I almost fell off my chair right then and there.

Looking back on it now I can see I had nothing to worry about since CNC does an exceptional job of preparing their students for the working world. Participating in interactive lectures for several hours each week built a strong academic foundation for my career. I recognized the value of attending these lectures in person as did the program instructors. Faculty were also accommodating on multiple occasions, allowing me to attend two- and three-hour lectures with my daughter when child care was unavailable to me.

As a hands-on learner, I would have to say the most valuable time I spent in the program was in the dental clinic. I recognize that not all dental hygiene learning institutions are fortunate enough to be able to provide students with an abundance of clients to work with. Having to be responsible for recruiting your own clients can add stress to an already stressful time. CNC has worked hard over the years to build a large and diverse client population, giving students many opportunities to learn from and work with clients who have challenging and unique needs. I currently live in Terrace, BC, where my office provides dental care to several small villages in the surrounding area where access to dental care is limited. The population is such that I see very complex clients daily. During my time in school I had plenty of exposure to complex clients with varying levels of periodontal disease, extensive health histories, and unique client management needs, so I was well prepared to begin my chosen career.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: GRADUATION DAY

Graduation day was another monumental day for me as I looked back on the challenges I had both faced and overcome. One of those challenges happened during my year completing the prerequisites. I was shocked and devastated to discover that I wouldn't be able to complete all the courses within a year due to a scheduling overlap. Chemistry and biology were in the same time block and I needed both for the dental hygiene program. After some meetings with the college dean and relevant faculty members, I was given permission to take my biology course without ever attending the lectures. It was agreed that I could borrow equipment from the college's library to record these lectures to later review and make notes. Before each biology class I would run to set up and record the lecture and then rush back down the hall to attend my chemistry

lecture. I would later collect my equipment, sign it out for the night, review the lecture at home, take notes, and return the equipment the following day.

Not all challenges are faced externally either. Something else that I learned in my time at CNC was the importance of positive self-talk and not giving up. I am a student who failed a mid-term exam. I am a student who failed a final exam. However, more importantly, I am a student who graduated from an accredited dental hygiene program with a diploma with honours! It can be easy to lose sight of your end goals in the hysteria of failure and disappointment. Having some special faculty there to get your head back in the game with love and support can help clear the fog. When you feel like you are losing, fight harder because as long as you're still standing you can still win. On graduation day I was elated at my ability to handle adversity and felt a sense of accomplishment as I prepared myself to take on the working world. I was excited but nervous to leave the program. The thought of no longer having an experienced dental hygiene instructor to double-check all of my work and review all of my debridement was scary. I had just been given a licence-to-scale and it felt both empowering and terrifying. With great power comes great responsibility they say. So, I did my best to stride with confidence into my new full-time position as a registered dental hygienist in my hometown of Terrace, BC.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: WORKING IN PRIVATE PRACTICE

Starting my new job was a rollercoaster as I adjusted to the intensely fast-paced environment. I began utilizing my knowledge and skills acquired in school while adapting to and learning new skills in the workplace. Treatment planning, insurance limits, and dental code cheat sheets covered every wall and cupboard door for months. As I scrambled to keep up, I continued to repeat these words in my head daily: "take your time, take your time, take your time." Remembering my days as a student, I was well aware of the mistakes that can be made when you rush to keep up with appointment times. Luckily, I have a really supportive lead dental hygienist who always insists, "If you cannot complete everything today you can always book them back for more time." Clinic instructors were always stressing the importance of completing all aspects of ADPIE care thoroughly rather than getting focussed on debridement only. Understanding and respecting proper time management was a huge part of school both in lectures and the clinic, because it plays such an important role in the quality of care provided by dental hygienists. I spent the first several months booking back a lot of clients and in all honesty still do.

Four months after graduation my instrumentation skills were put to the test when I encountered a very challenging debridement case. A female client had come into the office

with no outstanding complaint; she was simply looking for a routine new client exam and a thorough cleaning. After reviewing her radiographs, a large radiopacity was noted on the distal of her 37 (Figure 1). Clinically, there was nothing to be noted in the area and the radiopacity shared a strong resemblance to an enamel pearl, even though it did not present in a location where you might expect to see one. After some deliberation, it was determined that it was likely a large calculus deposit.

Consequently, the client was booked for a debridement appointment where a local anesthetic would have to be used for the procedure. For all my moments of self-doubt and anxiety in my new job, I have to admit that I felt fully confident and prepared to take on the challenge. My time at CNC fully prepared me for real-life scenarios such as this that require confidence, knowledge, and skill. I knew what needed to be done and how I was going to do it. I thought out and determined the necessary aspects of this client's personalized treatment plan, identifying the need for local anesthetic for client comfort, placing the inferior alveolar nerve block to ensure adequate freezing of the appropriate location and tissues, using a blue standard ultrasonic tip (better suited to large, tenacious deposits), fine scaling the root surface with my mini Graceys (they offered better access to the depth and anatomy of the treatment area). The appointment took just over an hour of debridement before I was able to dislodge and extract the deposit from the 11 mm pocket. Figure 2 is a post-debridement radiograph of the tooth, free of deposit. The subgingival calculus was removed, for the most part, in one large piece and can be seen in Figure 3.

I was unable to re-evaluate due to the client's winter/spring travel plans. However, the client was advised to seek dental hygiene treatment again within the next three months.

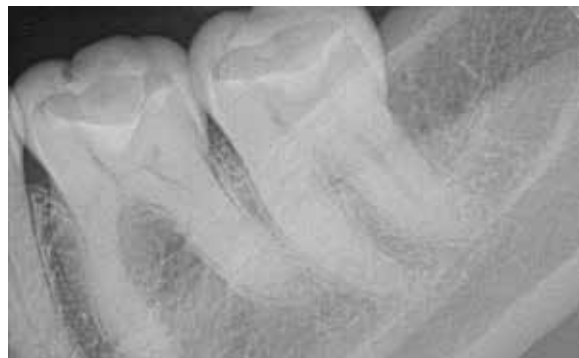
Real-life scenarios such as this convey how both appropriate education and adequate preparation have shaped me for the career that I have today. Using the knowledge and skills gained as a CNC dental hygiene student, I have had many other new and exciting experiences in my commencing career, such as working with clients with special needs and with IV-sedated clients. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to be educated, encouraged, and guided by Leslie Battersby and other CNC dental hygiene faculty members. CNC ensured that I was well prepared as a new graduate, with the confidence to realize my dream of becoming a dental hygienist.

CONCLUSION

While the instructors' and students' journeys in the dental hygiene program are very different at times, they are also very much the same. Both journeys are centred on overcoming challenges while supporting each other and growing both personally and professionally. Instructors are responsible for preparing students each year with the



▲ Figure 1. Molar periapical radiograph (photo credit: Lisa Linteris)



▲ Figure 2. Molar periapical radiograph, post-debridement (photo credit: Aria Kensley)



▲ Figure 3. Calculus deposit (photo credit: Aria Kensley)

knowledge and skills necessary to help strengthen the dental hygiene profession, while students are responsible for learning these skills and finding their own unique ways of applying that knowledge to their personal practice. When the academic journey is completed and another graduating class full of eager minds is sent on its way, it is a fulfilling day for everyone involved. Our shared passion for the dental hygiene profession and for life-long learning keeps all of us learning, growing, and connected.