

Student Scene



Advocacy and Outreach: Bolstering Social Connections

by Linda Da Silva, CDHA student representative, Niagara College • dasilvali932@gmail.com

As a profession, dental hygiene inherently has a high level of social responsibility: our work aims to benefit the individual client and the community surrounding them. Education is a huge part of this responsibility. Most of the workday is education. We discuss everything with our clients, including why fluoride is crucial, why radiographs translate to better care, why brushing with this specific technique is best for this specific client. Throughout my time as a dental hygiene student, I have become rather passionate about oral health education, especially tailoring it to each client. It is like a puzzle or a mystery game where you use what you already know, along with the hints that are revealed, to create a perfect, client-centred care plan. However, there are often opportunities to educate a larger group as well; this is where community health comes into play.

A unique course offered at Niagara College is Community Health, in which we focus on promoting oral health within communities via education. We learn to create lesson plans to educate different populations about oral health: from cancer patients to immigrants, from expecting parents to residents in long-term care facilities. The most anticipated community service outreach opportunity during the course this past year was the dental education blitz, in which senior dental hygiene students were sent to educate students from junior kindergarten to grade 8 in elementary schools across Welland, Ontario.



I was one of those senior students who visited a Grade 2 class in March 2025. The bulk of my lesson was a storybook—one from my childhood that ignited my passion for the dental field. *Open Wide: Tooth School Inside* by Laurie Keller is a children's book that follows a class of teeth during a day of school. They learn all about themselves and what it means to be a tooth: from brushing and flossing to the structure of a tooth, to the importance of baby teeth, and, worst of all, tooth decay! Together, the grade 2 students and I also explored the age-appropriate Fones technique of toothbrushing, practising big circles that touch the teeth and gums, but it was clear that the story was the highlight of our lesson. This book sparked an interest in the children's oral health as inquisitive minds started to race.



When given the opportunity to ask relevant questions, hands shot up immediately:

"I had cavities, so the dentist put shiny metal on my teeth. What is that?"

"What is a toothache?"

"Why can't I eat after going to the dentist?"

"What makes my teeth wiggly?"



The children and I had a fantastic discussion, exploring everything from fluoride varnish to stainless steel crowns. They seemed genuinely intrigued by all this new information. But they didn't stop there. They made sure I knew that they brushed their teeth every day. "I brush two times a day!" Not only were they engaged with the lesson, but they were also happy to demonstrate their current knowledge.

Community health is a unique aspect of the profession that I was not very aware of when I applied to the dental hygiene program at Niagara College. Yet, my time in the program has shown me the importance of advocacy and outreach in the world of dental hygiene, especially among vulnerable populations and our youth. As evidenced by my experience at the elementary school and also at a daycare conducting a similar outreach, most children are willing

and excited to learn about oral health: they just need to be given the opportunity. Community health provides a chance for dental hygienists to bolster social connections, creating a more supportive environment and a more trusting relationship between young clients and oral health professionals. This will hopefully increase confidence in the profession and reduce fear and anxiety surrounding the dental chair. It all starts with us: with a discussion, a chance to educate.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my professor Jeannette Kulik for facilitating this initiative. I learned so much from her throughout my time at Niagara College, and I was given so many unique experiences in her courses that I know will make me a better clinician.