

Talking Ethics



Ethical Responsibilities of a Mobile Independent Dental Hygiene Practice

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Launching a mobile independent dental hygiene practice is no small feat. It requires ingenuity, perseverance, and a significant amount of problem-solving skills. In particular, as my fellow mobile independent dental hygienists already know, our ethical responsibilities as health care professionals do not decrease in any way simply because we are now mobile. We still have the same ethical responsibilities as dental hygienists practising in a clinical setting, but now the onus is on us to ensure we have the means to meet the necessary standards of practice while on the move.

Some responsibilities are easy to fulfill. Obtaining consent, taking medical and dental histories, and even screening for COVID-19 can be completed in advance using a variety of methods, including but not limited to online forms and over-the-phone consultations. Dental or health care software programs and their supporting applications are invaluable.

Once you have collected the pertinent background information, you may need to collaborate with other health care professionals. For example, you may need to obtain medical clearance from a physician, consult with a pharmacist on your client's medications or obtain copies of dental records including radiographs.

Some responsibilities require logistical skills. How will you transport all necessary sundries, instruments, equipment including PPE, infection control products, educational or oral health instructional products, and an emergency/first aid kit safely? Do you have enough instruments and supplies for the day or will you need to stop and sterilize or refill? How are you going to safely transport contaminated instruments and sharps?

Once you arrive at your client's location, you will need to ensure that their safety needs¹ are met as well as your own. What is your policy in the event of a medical emergency? It may differ if you are in a residential setting as opposed to inside a long-term care facility. It may be prudent to ensure that you have obtained emergency contact information

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Ethical Responsibilities of a Mobile...cont'd

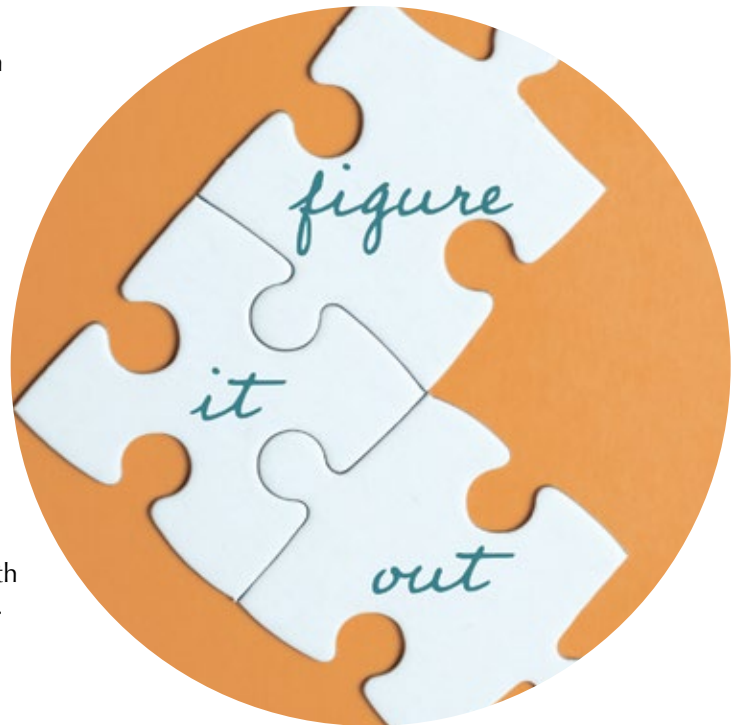
from your client should something occur or to know the locations of the emergency call bell or contact information for the nursing staff. Consider an escape route in case of a fire that includes a safe meeting place if you have additional staff with you, and what to do in the event of an unexpected incident (e.g., a violent person inside a long-term care facility or school or a threat outside that prevents you from leaving). These considerations will be unique to each location in which you find yourself during the day, week or month.

Once set up, you may now begin taking your client's vital signs. Perhaps you brought a thermometer and a blood pressure cuff if visiting a residence, or perhaps all vital signs are monitored and updated routinely by the nursing staff at a long-term care facility. You will need a method to accurately record the data. Consideration must be given to how your client's private and confidential health care records will be appropriately managed and protected.

As you are providing your client with their dental hygiene care, you will also have to ensure that their oral hygiene habits are evaluated and you may need to establish new or modify existing oral self-care goals together. It is often helpful to have products on hand to give a hands-on demonstration along with instructions for use. In a residential setting with an independent client, it would be acceptable to show them directly. However, if working with a non-independent client, it is prudent, necessary, and ethical to involve the caregiver(s) to ensure that you are helping the client establish the best possible oral health care routine.

As you complete a dental hygiene care appointment, it is important to remember that your ethical responsibilities include making appropriate and prompt referrals when your client's needs fall outside the dental hygiene scope of practice.² You may need to be part of the interprofessional consultation process with and for your client to ensure they receive optimal care.

Finally, how will you take payment or submit insurance claims securely, avoiding a privacy data breach? You may need to consider what type of devices and telecommunications limitations may affect your ability to perform these services onsite. In some cases, you may need to wait until you can return to a more reliable connection.



Owning or working for a mobile independent dental hygiene practice is incredibly rewarding. Many dental hygienists who are already doing so will tell you with passion about their role as an independent oral health care professional. However, the ethical responsibilities associated with professional dental hygiene care must not be overlooked. I have long incorporated a quotation from Mr. John Lennon as my mantra when navigating a new responsibility challenge: "There are no problems, only solutions."

References

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2. College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario. *Guideline: Interprofessional collaboration*. Toronto: CDHO; September 2016. Available from: cdho.org/docs/default-source/pdfs/reference/guidelines/gui_interprofessional_collaboration.pdf?sfvrsn=584381a0_22