

Introduction

Critical thinking is the cornerstone of dental hygiene practice. Hygienists in practice and education work with patients of all ages to assess their personal oral hygiene needs, and educate them about interdental needs and interdental cleaning techniques such as flossing⁽¹⁻²⁾. Recently, a much-publicized report, *Medical Benefits of Dental Floss Unproven* by the Associated Press (AP) stated the federal government no longer supported flossing as effective due to the lack of longitudinal clinical studies⁽³⁾.

The new Dental Hygiene Sub Group of the South Texas Oral Health Network (DH-STOHN) gathered data from practicing dental hygienists (DH) and educators (DHE) to characterize what effect the AP report had on attitudes about presenting flossing to their patients. *The specific aims were to assess DH/DHEs awareness of the report and examine the effect it had on their attitudes toward flossing.*

Methods

- **Online survey** (Qualtrics©) formatted in Likert-type, dichotomous and open-ended questions
- **Recruitment:**
 - Social Media: Facebook, group pages, STOHN membership database and local dental hygiene component pages
 - Convenience sample of n=71 participants. All data were de-identified, aggregated and analyzed for frequency, means, binary outcomes and thematic narrative
- **Data:**
 - De-identified and aggregated
 - Analyzed for frequency, means, binary outcomes and thematic narrative

Findings

Demographics:

- 97% were female,
- 73% were non-Hispanic White
- 41% were 46 years old or older
- 48% graduated with an Associate Degree
- 74% also earned a Bachelor or Master Degree
- 58% had 20 or more years experience
- 34% were either full time practicing or full time hygiene faculty

Findings (cont.)

Awareness of the AP Report

- Most (77%) aware of the report
 - learning of it from *"patients, family, and friends"* (33%)
- Many (61%) disagreed there was *"no evidence"* supporting flossing
- Some (49%) felt the report's references were *not reliable*
- Flossing was by far (62%) the *least recommended device* for interdental cleaning

Critical Thinking

- Few (9%) strongly agreed there was *"no evidence"* supporting flossing more
- Many (54%) felt the references used by the report were not reliable
- Only 7% stated it changed how they discuss flossing with their patients.

"I am more conscious about explaining the rational in research for my recommendations."



Attitudes towards flossing

- Many (62%) stated that flossing was by far the *least recommended device* used for interdental cleaning
- Most hygienists (90%) stated that patients asked about the report fewer than 5 times per week.

Findings (cont.)

"I let them know some type of interdental cleaning is still important."

"I individualize their oral health instruction and let them know why the toothbrush can't reach the proximal surfaces."

"Clinicians ultimately hold the experience and knowledge to exercise the best judgements in the interests of our patients."

Conclusions

This study sample accurately reflected the demographics of US DH and DHE. Initial reactions to the AP report described low levels of confidence in its resources. That being said, the AP report motivated dental hygienists in private practice and education to discuss the evidence and personalize oral health instruction for patients. The findings re-iterated that DH and DHE utilize their expertise and critical thinking skills to determine the best-individualized oral care techniques for their patients.

References

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2. Sambunja D, Nickerson JW, Poklepovic T, Johnson TM, Imai P, Tugwell P, Worthington HV. Flossing for the management of periodontal diseases and dental caries in adults. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2011, Issue 12.
3. Donn J. Medical benefits of floss unproven. (August 2, 2016) Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/f7e66079d9ba4b4985d7af350619a9e3>

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