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Empowering Dental Hygienists: Advocating for Independent Practice in Pennsylvania

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Advocacy is the cornerstone of positive change, propelling a profession towards progress and expanded opportunities. Advocacy takes on a critical role in dental hygiene, especially when considering the need for registered dental hygienists (RDH) to practice independently in Pennsylvania. The dental hygiene profession, like any other, requires a collective voice to influence legislative changes that will enhance the delivery of oral healthcare services to the community.

1. Defining Advocacy

Advocacy, in the context of dental hygiene, refers to the proactive support and promotion of policies that empower dental hygienists to enhance their roles, improve patient access to care, and contribute to overall public health. It is a deliberate effort to bring about positive changes within the legal framework governing dental hygiene practice.

Here are key reasons why advocacy holds such importance:

2. Voice for Change

Advocacy provides a collective voice to address challenges, inequalities, and limitations within a profession or community. It allows individuals to come together and express their concerns, needs, and aspirations, amplifying their impact.

3. Legislative Influence

Advocacy is a powerful tool to influence legislation and policies. Advocacy efforts can shape the legal framework that governs a profession by actively engaging with lawmakers, ensuring that it aligns with current needs and priorities.

4. Public Awareness

Advocacy raises awareness among the public about specific issues or challenges faced by a profession or community. It educates individuals and encourages them to support causes that contribute to positive change.

5. Addressing Inequities

Advocacy plays a crucial role in addressing inequities and disparities. It helps bring attention to systemic issues, promoting fairness and equal opportunities within professions and communities.

6. Professional Empowerment

Advocacy empowers individuals within a profession to actively participate in decision-making processes. It gives professionals a platform to contribute their expertise and insights to shape policies directly impacting their work.

7. Community Impact

Advocacy has a direct impact on the communities served by a profession. It ensures that the community's needs are considered in policy decisions, leading to improved services, increased accessibility, and better overall outcomes.

8. Adaptation to Change

Professions, including dental hygiene, continually evolve in response to societal changes, technological advancements, and healthcare trends. Advocacy enables professionals to adapt to these changes by advocating for necessary modifications to regulations and practices.

9. Promoting Best Practices

Advocacy supports the promotion of evidence-based practices and standards within a profession. By advocating for adherence to best practices, professionals contribute to delivering high-quality services and patient care.

10. Strengthening Professional Identity

Engaging in advocacy fosters a sense of professional identity and solidarity. It encourages professionals to take pride in their

work, knowing that they play an active role in shaping the present and future of their field.

In dental hygiene, advocacy is essential for ensuring dental hygienists have the autonomy, resources, and opportunities to provide optimal oral healthcare services. It is a driving force for positive change, enabling professionals to overcome challenges, adapt to evolving landscapes, and contribute to the well-being of the communities they serve.

11. Importance of Advocacy in Dental Hygiene

Advocacy is crucial to the dental hygiene profession for several reasons. Firstly, it enables dental hygienists to address the evolving healthcare landscape and adapt their roles to meet the community's needs better. By advocating for changes in the Dental Hygiene Practice Act, dental hygienists can strive towards practicing independently, akin to the Public Health Dental Hygiene Practitioner (PHDHP) model, but fee-for-service reimbursement.

12. Current Landscape in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania has taken steps toward enhancing dental hygiene practice by allowing dental hygienists to administer local anesthesia under the direct supervision of a general dentist. Additionally, dental hygienists meeting specific criteria can provide direct patient care in federally funded healthcare centers, including long-term care facilities and head-start and pre-k count preschool programs, catering to underserved populations.

13. Addressing the Need for Independent Practice

The reality is that there is an increasing demand for dental providers in Pennsylvania who can offer dental hygiene therapy services at an affordable price. Opening avenues for dental hygienists to practice independently can significantly address this need. By allowing dental hygienists to operate in a fee-for-service practice modality, they can bill at standard rates, making their services financially sustainable and accessible to a broader population.

14. Financial Realities

Many dentists cannot absorb the cost difference between Medicaid reimbursement rates and their office's standard fee schedule. Dental hygienists face similar challenges when working independently. By enabling dental hygienists to operate fee-for-service practices, they can bridge the gap, providing affordable services while sustaining their practices financially.

15. Advocacy Organizations

Dental hygienists looking to make a difference should actively engage with advocacy organizations such as the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) and the Pennsylvania Dental Hygienists' Association (PDHA). These organizations provide a platform to unite voices, share experiences, and collectively lobby for changes in legislation that benefit the dental hygiene profession.

16. The Path Forward

Dental hygienists should consider opening dental facilities with dental hygiene practitioners exclusively, adhering to the state licensing and practice act abilities set by the state board of dentistry. With necessary referrals to a general dentist, this model ensures that patients receive comprehensive care while allowing dental hygienists to operate independently, providing dental hygiene therapy services to a greater patient population.