The role of the Registered Dental Hygienist is significant to the dental office team. Many important components to patient treatment and care are those services that a Dental Hygienist is trained and licensed to perform. I have been a Registered Dental Hygienist in a private dental practice for the past 24 years. My daily tasks include full mouth debridement called hand scaling and root planing, administering local anesthetic, ultrasonic cleaning, routine dental cleaning known as recall appointments, taking full mouth x-rays and processing them, fluoride treatments, desensitizing treatments, recording and reviewing patient medical histories, charting oral conditions, blood pressure screenings, patient education and oral care instructions.

The Dental Hygienist works along side of the Dentist and Dental Assistant to insure that the patient’s oral conditions are noted and cared for at each appointment. It is very important that the team works as a cohesive unit to communicate with each other about the patient’s needs and concerns. Communication is very important so that the patient is able to understand the treatment plan and have the ability to ask questions of any of the staff members. Often times the Dentist will perform the oral exam when the patient is having the appointment for the routine dental recall appointment with the Dental Hygienist. While the Dentist may address concerns that the patient might have, it is most often the Hygienist that is left with the patient to clarify any questions or reiterate the proposed treatment. It is important that the Hygienist is educated to speak clearly and concisely to the patient in reviewing the treatment plan. It is also important that the Hygienist and the Dentist have shared work ethics and philosophies that put the patient’s needs first and want the most optimum of standards for the treatment of the patients in their practice. It is important that the Hygienist have a good command of the English Language so that patients can understand the proposed treatment. Since competition is great with so many Dentists in the profession, it is important to understand that it is a consumer’s choice to go anywhere they please thus it is important that the Hygienist is able to ease the patient’s fears and educate them as best as possible.

After the curriculum to become a Dental Hygienist is completed, one is licensed on a national level and a regional level. This licensure is up for renewal every 3 years with mandatory continuing education required. Also a Hygienist must re-certify for Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). It is paramount that the Hygienist be a perpetual student and continually seek new knowledge to support the current theories and practices in the field. Patients respect your desire to give them the best answers possible. They also are impressed when the material is presented in simple yet educated format. Patients build their trust on the team when fears about treatment are addressed and they are made to feel comfortable. It is our duty to always be empathetic to our patient’s needs and concerns. Membership in professional organizations such as the American Dental Hygienist’s Association and the Illinois State Dental Society are helpful in securing the continuing education needed to renew the state license. It is also a
wonderful avenue for maintaining professional relationships throughout one’s career. With membership in these organizations, educational materials and journals are available to also promote the quest for constant learning. Professional seminars are always available to attend and cost is minimized with membership. The profession is protected under the umbrella of these wonderful organizations so that standards of care are never compromised.

When considering a career as a Dental Hygienist some personal attributes might include punctuality, professional and tidy appearance, reliability, willing to work as a team member, empathy for patients of all ages, respect for fellow workers, positive attitude, ability to comfort people and self-confidence. Someone once said, “You don’t get a Second chance at making a First impression.” This is very true of the role of a Dental Hygienist since they are usually the person that greets a patient and brings them in for their patient appointment. It is important to be on time and cheerful as to not make a patient wait beyond their appointment time. There also must be first and foremost the desire to put the patient first and help them achieve their best oral health possible. People will respond effectively when they are respected and appreciated. After 24 years in my practice, I am most certain that my patients respect the care and concern that I have for their wellbeing and health. They are loyal to my appointments with me. I am blessed to have found a career that I enjoy and patients who have become a second family.