

A Day In the Life of a Dental Hygienist Karen Siebert, RDH, BS

Have you ever wondered why someone would want to “just clean teeth all day?” “Isn’t it just cosmetic?” “It doesn’t take much to buff up teeth, right?” As a practicing dental hygienist, I would like to share a typical day at a dental office. You may find that hygienists do much more than “buff up” teeth.

The morning begins a half hour before the first patient is scheduled. I prepare for the day by looking through each patient’s chart. I am looking to see what preventive treatment might be needed for this appointment, and I review the patients’ medical history. I also want to know when the patient was last in our office for an appointment, and what was done. Was it preventive? An emergency? A new filling? Are they in the middle of treatment with the doctor? All of this information helps individualize each patient’s treatment.

Once I review patient charts, it is time to meet with the rest of the staff. As a staff, we want to work together to support our patients and any needs they have. We let each other know what help we might need to keep the day running smoothly and give our patients the highest standard of care.

Now I go set up my treatment room. I look to see that all surfaces are clean and set out instruments and disposables needed for the first patient. I check room supplies to be sure they are stocked.

Today is full of variety. My first patient is here for their routine preventive appointment. There are a few patients scheduled today with active gum disease. Each of those patients will need specialized treatment to stop the disease and begin the healing process. These appointments are customized in length according to the treatment being given – anywhere from an hour to two hours each. There are two children and one more adult in the schedule today for preventive appointments. With all of the patients I see, I will spend a few minutes of the appointment to teach them ways to take care of their

teeth at home. Communicating home care needs to the patient is an integral part of a hygienist's day.

It is time to greet the first patient of the day. Some patients are uncomfortable coming to the dental office, so I try to greet each person warmly and welcome them to the office. By the time they are settled into the dental chair, they are much more comfortable. I know many of my patients, and will usually spend a couple of minutes asking about their life, family, etc. This gives their blood pressure time to stabilize if they have been in a rush or anxious. We then review their health history to update changes they have had, or new medications as these can affect their oral health. We talk about any dental concerns they have that day. Then we move on to the treatment phase of the appointment. If needed, I take x-rays with our digital sensor. The patient loves to see the x-ray on the computer screen.

Once we have the x-rays, it is time to look in the mouth. There are several key exams to do. I examine the extra-oral and intra-oral tissues, the teeth, and the gum tissue. Based on the data collected, we begin scaling and polishing the teeth. Sometime during the appointment, the dentist comes to examine the patient. I communicate any findings from my exam to the dentist, and we discuss needed dentistry with the patient. The dentist typically only spends 5 minutes with us, so it is up to me to be sure to record the findings in the computer and the chart. It is also my responsibility to be sure the patient understands the dentist's diagnosis and schedules the treatment.

Once I have dismissed the first patient, I head back to the operator to clean and disinfect the room. This is a crucial step that prevents potential infectious germs from being passed to the next patient or us. As during patient treatment, I am wearing disposable gloves, mask, and eye protection.

The rest of the day will follow the same sequence of treatment, but the treatment itself will vary based on the findings of each patient's exam. The patients coming for treatment of gum disease may spend

90 minutes with me while I use our specially designed instruments to remove the infective bacteria. Some patients may even need to have local anesthetic during this type of appointment to assure patient comfort and effective removal of the diseased tissue.

A typical day in a dental office is seven to eight hours of patient time, and an hour break for lunch. When the patient schedule is complete, the staff still has some things to do. A final disinfecting is done, including washing the floor. All equipment is inspected and readied for the sterilizer. Equipment lines are cleared of water, and the sterilizer is started. We all help each other to finish so no one is left with all of the chores.

The next day will bring a new set of patients with their own unique concerns and challenges. I will again take those individual needs and create a plan that aims to treat each patient with the highest standard of care. Not just a buff and shine for everyone. Not just cleaning teeth. Maybe – just maybe - an appointment that will contribute to a lifetime of good overall health.