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Creating a Dentist-Dental Hygienist Collaborative Relationship

Tell me about the Let's Smile story, and how you found your collaborative dentist.

I was a sub at a dental practice in my hometown, covering for a hygienist who was on medical leave. Being in that position provided a wonderful opportunity to develop a professional relationship with the dentist owner. I noticed that he participates in Give Kids a Smile (GKAS) and sponsors local children's park and rec teams. In 2013, I approached him with the idea of becoming a collaborative dentist for me. I explained my plan to provide dental hygiene services to low income children and adolescents through non-traditional practice based in school-based clinics. He was hesitant at first since he had not heard of this concept. I provided him with information found on the Normandale Community College "21st Century Dental Team" website regarding Collaborative Dental Hygiene Practice in Community Settings. These are fantastic resources!

The dentist was under the impression that he would have to take all the referrals of the children seen by Let's Smile. He was a current provider for Delta Dental Civic Smiles, Medicaid/Medical Assistance (MA) and UCare, however, the number of patients in his office on MA is limited and only to existing patients. I found three local offices that would accept Let's Smile's MA patients and assured him that I would only use his office as a referral source for GKAS.

What were some of the more difficult things you had to figure out when first practicing as a Collaborative Practice Dental Hygienist?

One thing we worked on was how referrals would work, because the dental practice couldn't handle all of them. To solve for this, I needed to find offices that I could refer to.

How did you accomplish that?

I called around and found other dental offices in the area that would accept MA and referrals. I send most of my referrals to a dental office in a neighboring city. We have a really special relationship and model that makes it a win-win-win for everybody! Let's Smile contracts with one of their collaborative hygienists for each school-based dental clinic day. Then, we refer the patients to that dental practice (as well as 2 other locations) for follow up care. Dental therapists in the dental practice see the kids for follow up care when needed. This makes for continuation of care and an ongoing relationship to a dental home. This model is how we make our program sustainable.

You mentioned you have had 2 collaborative dentists, right?

Yes, after three years my collaborative dentist had some growing concerns over liability issues and chose to no longer participate as Let's Smile's collaborative dentist.

I then researched dentists that were active in my community. I became aware of another dentist who also participates in GKAS and sponsors local sports teams. He was and still is on the board of the Children's Remedial Fund. He was and still is an active member of the Minnesota Dental Association. When I approached asked him to be my collaborative dentist, he already had knowledge of how a collaborative agreement works. He very graciously said yes! He wanted to use this model to reach and impact underserved families. He is a current provider for MA and had limited his practice to patients of record. I reassured him that Let's Smile had a strong referral arrangement already with a dental practice which helped with his decision to participate. He attends the Let's Smile board meetings, offers me advice, and is a true advocate for oral health care.

Do you have any other tips for hygienists looking to partner with a dentist in a collaborative agreement?

Begin by researching the dentists in your area. How involved are they in the community? What are they doing for the kids (or the populations that you serve)? Do they volunteer? Look for dentists that want to make a difference, and brainstorm together about how it can be done.

What would you say to dental hygienists hesitant about asking a dentist to form a collaborative agreement?

I would just say get curious about why you are hesitant. Perhaps, you don't fully understand the power you could have together! Collaborative Dental Hygiene Practice has the potential to make a HUGE impact in your community and the communities around you. In the end, the worst thing that can happen is that they say no. Then, just continue to ask around until you hear YES! Believe me, there ARE dentists out there who want to support new and non-traditional ways of delivering care-- especially during these trying times.

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