

# Volunteering

By **Carol A. Jahn, RDH, MS**

*Volunteer: To give of one's time without any expectation of compensation.*

Society depends on volunteers. From helping stock a food pantry to assisting with a school book drive, volunteers make a difference. For the year 2008, nearly 62 million people volunteered at least once, with more women volunteering than men, 29.4 percent versus 23.2 percent respectively. The average amount of time given was 52 hours or simply one hour per week.<sup>1</sup>

ADHA is a volunteer organization. It is the volunteer member who keeps the national, state and local organizations running and vital. Members organize continuing education meetings, write for newsletters and participate in community service. While no empirical data exists on the percentage of members who volunteer or the amount of time committed, past history shows that once dental hygienists begin participating in volunteer activities at some level within ADHA, they keep volunteering for several years.

What keeps these volunteers committed?

## Volunteering Provides a Social Network

According to South Carolina Dental Hygienists' Association President Renee Spencer, RDH, being an active member of the American Dental Hygienists' Association has helped make her who she is today.

Spencer said, "It has developed my self-esteem and confidence, poise and social skills, professional voice, legislative knowledge, speaking, leadership and organizational skills; plus, it has been key for the best friendships and relationships in the world. Years ago during a job change and subsequent relocation, my husband's temporary housing was 'iced over' and electricity was out. Due to the nature of the ice storm, officials were predicting days until power could be restored. I called on a hygienist I had met through a state board of trustees meeting and asked her if she could recommend a hotel in her part of the state where my husband could stay. She and her husband took my husband in and allowed him to stay with them for three days until power was restored.

"Years down the road, I served as a line officer with that very hygienist for two years and still value her friendship to this day. She has invited my husband to meals, sewn clothes and baked pies for my children. We have had numerous late night and ridiculously long phone calls just chatting about hygiene matters, as well as personal things."

Kelli Swanson-Jaecks, RDH, MA, president of the Oregon Dental Hygienists' Association, agrees. "Through my involvement with my state association, I have acquired the skills and confidence to seek out and successfully fulfill many leadership positions," she explained. "I have gained committed friendships and relationships

with women whom I can turn to with any questions, doubts or needs I have. I count my 'hygiene posse' as some of the dearest friends I have!"

A report by the Corporation for National and Community Service on the Health Benefits of Volunteering validates the experiences of Spencer and Swanson-Jaecks. The report states, "Volunteer activities can strengthen social ties that protect individuals from isolation during difficult times, while the experience of helping others leads to a sense of greater self-worth and trust."<sup>2</sup> This enhanced social interaction from volunteering had even more benefits. People who volunteer also report having better physical health along with fewer instances of depression.<sup>2</sup>

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## Volunteering Provides a Sense of Purpose

For Carrie Ghaname, RDH, MS, chair of the ADHA Council on Public Relations, volunteering has meant literally taking ownership of the vision of the association. "Serving helped create a unity with the other people that I volunteered with – specifically my professional colleagues," she said. "I think you realize that you really can make a difference and be a part of moving the profession forward."

Swanson-Jaecks added that she has discovered this too. "From my volunteer experiences, I am committed to speaking out and working towards change for our neediest citizens. I want to improve our current delivery system to bring about better access to oral health care."

Data indicate that gaining a greater sense of purpose through volunteering contributes significantly to better life satisfaction. Volunteering can provide a sense of personal accomplishment and enhanced identity.

Swanson-Jaecks said that she is often asked about the benefits of volunteering and tells her dental hygiene colleagues, "Do it! Even if you are unsure of your abilities or don't think you know everything you should know. None of us have all the answers, and learning along the way is part of growing. Volunteering will feed your soul. You get to be a part of something bigger and greater than yourself. You get to be part of a solution, instead of a problem. Whether the volunteering is serving on councils or committees of your association or hands-on with under-accessed individuals, volunteering adds value to your life."

## Volunteering Can Make You a Better Dental Hygienist

Gaining new job skills is another benefit of volunteering. A 2000 survey of Canadians found that more than three-

quarters of respondents felt that their volunteer activities helped them improve their interpersonal skills including understanding people better, motivating others and dealing with difficult situations.<sup>3</sup>

Ghaname said the experiences on the ADHA Council on Public Relations helped her develop new skills, especially facilitation and active listening. "In 2008, as the council chair, I had to facilitate the council discussion," she explained. "It was really a great opportunity, and I found myself really listening as opposed to expressing my opinion because it was my job to take the main point of the dialogue, discuss options and move the council towards consensus on a decision. It certainly was not easy, especially when there were differing opinions. However, at the end of the meeting, I had learned so much from just listening to the different views and opinions on the issues facing our profession."

Spencer feels that her volunteer efforts have helped her feel "in the loop" and better able to discuss important and practical things with her patients on a daily basis. She also said that she now feels a certain amount of respect from her employers and colleagues, as if there is a "golden thread that links us."

"Product updates and timely topics regarding total body health, insurance(s) and legalities such as informed consent or informed declination of services are of the utmost importance in today's society," she continued. "Fellow hygienists are often concerned with current issues, and being involved has helped me to have a better working knowledge of some of these issues."



**Kelli Swanson-Jaecks, RDH, MA, Oregon Dental Hygienists' Association President**

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## Volunteering Opens Up Opportunities

Expanding social networks and gaining new skills opens doors. When Ghaname was completing her graduate degree, she applied for and was awarded with an ADHA Summer Internship. Now, she teaches part-time at the University of Michigan and is pretty sure her service at the association gained her credibility.

"My perspective on the profession is much more global," she said. "It is easy to become confined to our own private practice and what is going on there, but volunteering gives you a chance to associate with other hygienists in different practices and even job settings, which really broadens your perspective about what is going on."

For Swanson-Jaecks, it was volunteering on Medical Teams International Dental Van at a local high school in her home city. "As a hygienist in the van, I usually triage the patient, take the



**Renee Spencer, RDH, South Carolina Dental Hygienists' Association President**

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needed X-rays and give local anesthesia. The patient is then ready for the doctor to jump right in and take care of the dental emergency. One student lifted himself into the van and hopped up in my chair. He had...no arms or legs! His arch was extremely narrow and his teeth were decayed down to the gum line. With no history of dental care, he had raging gingivitis and his teeth were covered in plaque and soft calculus. He was taking care of his own teeth! For him, I was able to debride his teeth and give him some specific homecare education. I would not have the skills, opportunities or this life-changing experience without my involvement in ADHA."

## Getting Involved

Think you need to be 'invited in' to volunteer? Not so. In fact, a study on volunteering found that an almost equal percentage of volunteers approached an organization on their own as opposed to being asked to help.<sup>4</sup> Most state and local dental hygiene associations are eager for new volunteers.

As Spencer tells prospective volunteers, "It doesn't have to be a big position—there is something for everyone at every level of interest, time and expertise. Volunteering helps get the work done while encouraging fellowship and networking. Whether it is assembling an email tree, monitoring or designing a Web site, calling prospective members, presenting a course, etc., there is something for everyone to do, and many hands make the work light."



**Carrie Ghaname, RDH, MS, ADHA Council on Public Relations Chair**

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Finding the time to serve is often a concern. On average, volunteers give from one to two hours a week to their organization.<sup>2</sup> A July 2008 research brief on volunteering found that most volunteers are about as busy as others. Many work and care for children. Where do they find the time? They watch less television. Volunteers watched about 325 less hours (nearly two full weeks) per year than non-volunteers.<sup>4</sup> So, if you are hooked on reality TV, consider volunteering and creating your own reality.

According to Ghaname, on her first volunteering experience, she said, "I felt like one of the youngest people there, and it was very intimidating. After a few hours, I felt like I was surrounded by some of the best dental hygienists in our profession. I really looked at it as a mentoring opportunity. These were all dental hygienists that I wanted to be like. I learned about so many different ways to get involved, as well as different career paths within the profession. I think just networking with other dental hygienists is an opportunity to learn more about what other practices are doing and new approaches to patient care."

## Conclusion

Volunteering is a two-way street. Associations like ADHA and its state and local organizations benefit, as does the volunteer. As members plan programs to improve the lives of dental hygienists and the oral health of patients, volunteers get greater life satisfaction and better health from volunteering. To

learn more about the exciting opportunities that await you within ADHA, visit the Web site at [www.adha.org/aboutadha/volunteer.htm](http://www.adha.org/aboutadha/volunteer.htm).

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