



## WHAT IS A DENTAL HYGIENIST?

A **registered dental hygienist (RDH)** is a licensed oral health professional who specializes in preventive and therapeutic care. Common procedures performed by hygienists include periodontal debridement, taking prescribed radiographs, applying dental sealants, applying fluorides, and providing education and instructions for attaining and maintaining oral health.

### **Oral Health Affects Overall Health and Health Care Costs**

Research has linked oral infections to Diabetes, Cardiovascular Disease, Stroke, Pneumonia, and Premature Birth. Hospital ER's have emerged as a national safety net for dental emergencies while lacking the capability of providing appropriate dental care. Preventive dental services, including professional cleanings, topical fluoride, and sealant applications, are particularly important to reduce overall disease and in turn reduce current and future dental and medical treatment costs.

### **Access to Oral Health Care in Iowa**

Access to quality oral health care in Iowa is a significant concern. **Seventy-five of Iowa's ninety-nine counties have been declared dental health care shortage areas.** Dental hygienists can play a vital role in improving access to dental care. We have already seen this in Iowa's very successful **I-Smile program**, which helps link patients served by Iowa's Maternal and Child Health Clinics with dental professionals. Other populations, especially seniors in nursing homes, could also benefit from greater access to dental hygienists and the preventive care services they can provide. One way to address this issue would be to allow hygienists who provide services outside of the traditional privately owned dental office to be directly reimbursed by Medicaid.

### **Issues of Interest to the Iowa Dental Hygienists Association**

1. Allow Dental Hygienists to provide education and perform oral health screenings without being under the supervision of a dentist. Support our bills: SSB3060 or HSB550
2. Continue to support the **I-Smile™** program to strengthen dental referral systems, provide preventive dental services, train health care providers, and promote good oral health starting at birth.
3. Explore new dental workforce models that would expand preventive and restorative dental services in Iowa and improve upon the use of an available dental hygiene workforce.
4. Increase oral health access for aging Iowans.