



Forging Excellence: The Journey of a Dental Hygienist Simulation Champion

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(Dental hygienists attend a clinical simulation training session fostering collaboration and enhancing skills for improved patient care. From front to back: 1st row: Kristen Klein, Sara Klabo, Wendy Frye-Agers, Dr. Monica Popowski; 2nd row: Dr. Mary Sturgeon, Kristen Miller, Dr. Keri Stahle, Dr. Deborah Adamec; 3rd row: Bonnie Cessna, Dana Cameron, Gabrielle Giebelstein, Abigayle Carpentier; 4th row: Laura Elliot, Kelsey Hansen, Dr. Scott McNaughton)

In today's evolving world of health care, the role of dental hygienists has gone beyond traditional dental care. With a growing emphasis on comprehensive patient wellness and preventive medicine, dental hygienists play a crucial role in promoting oral health and overall well-being. For dental hygienists, simulation-based training offers a unique opportunity to refine clinical competencies, develop critical thinking abilities, and cultivate effective communication skills—all essential elements in delivering the best patient care.

In May 2021, the Iowa City VA Medical Center (VAMC) Dental Clinic piloted a virtual clinical simulation program with three scenarios, led by SimLEARN's national simulation consultant for dentistry, Dr. Mary Sturgeon. This marked my introduction to clinical simulation and spurred a fruitful collaboration with Dr. Sturgeon for various programs. With the support of Dental Chief Dr. Deborah Adamec, I became the first dental hygienist to attend the SimLEARN Introduction to Clinical Simulation course in Orlando, Fla. A notable outcome of my training was networking with highly skilled nurses, physicians, and simulation techs. Together, our group developed an escape room for universal employee learning, not just those directly involved in patient care.

In July 2023, Dr. Sturgeon and I collaborated with clinical educators from the Jesse Brown VAMC in Chicago to create a one-day clinical simulation program during the American Dental Hygienists Association (ADHA) meeting. This program provided VA and Department of Defense (DoD) dental hygienists nationwide with an opportunity to engage in collaborative clinical simulation and become simulation champions. Participants learned skills to implement simulation-based training at their sites to help train colleagues. The group also attended the ADHA meeting, exchanging best practices and experiences from work at their VA sites.

In September 2023, Dr. Mary Sturgeon conducted an in-person clinical simulation at my home site in Iowa City, IA. Staff members identified emergency medical equipment, practiced effective closed-loop communication skills, utilized prevention and management of disruptive behavior training to de-escalate patient situations, and participated in a mock code for an unresponsive patient. These activities were part of a comprehensive training program that saw collaboration across multiple departments within our Iowa City VAMC (PMBD trainer, Suicide Prevention Team, and Clinical Simulation educators).

This training was important, providing significant takeaways and extensive learning from fellow employees across various sites. Notably, our sites identified gaps in knowledge regarding emergency equipment usage, leading to the creation of a clinical standard operating procedure (SOP) for department-wide annual staff training. This initiative also became a leadership project for me, where we ran trials to ensure timely AED retrieval and adherence to American Heart Association guidelines for delivering the first shock.

Collaboration with other VAMC sites and the DoD has enhanced our knowledge, bridged gaps between clinical nurse educators and the dental team, and boosted our staff's readiness in caring for Veterans. Additionally, we've learned from leaders in various departments, enabling us to better assist Veterans across diverse situations and scenarios. Dr. Adamec, Chief of Dental Services, summarized the experience best, stating, "This was the best training and participation we've ever had since I've been here."