

History of Inclusion of Dental Therapists in BSDHT

by Rhiannon Jones, President Elect, British Society of Dental Hygiene & Therapy

Background

In the United Kingdom we have had an Association/Society for Dental Hygienists (BDHA) for 75 years but the inclusion of Dental Therapists in 2006 resulted in a change in name. After three years of discussion at Council and Executive level, the proposal was put to the AGM and was passed by a narrow majority. It has been known as the 'The British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy' ever since. Dental Therapists have been trained in the UK since the 1950's but it was only in 2003/04 that the Department of Health permitted the Bachelor of Science Degree that we have today.

Prior to this, both dental hygienists and dental therapists were awarded separate Diplomas in most UK Universities. It was this change at an educational level that prompted the discussion in the BDHA as to whether to continue as an Association for Dental Therapists, or be more inclusive and have a Society that allowed both dental hygienists and dental therapists to join. In the UK, the Scope of Practice of a Dental Hygienist is incorporated in the role of a Dental Therapist which made it easier to justify this inclusion.

There was some 'push back' from members who couldn't understand why the Society had to change as there was a British Association for Dental Therapists (BADT) who, at that time, would not allow Dental Hygienists to join them. This led to a gap for those who practiced the Scope of both a DH and DTh. The BDHA was aware that in order to be inclusive and welcoming, they should not only allow DTh's to join but they should also change the name of the organisation to reflect this. There had not historically been much collaboration between the two professions as DTh's could only work in NHS or Community Clinics where DH's worked in all sectors.

The change in name and structure has meant that Journals, Conferences and Study Days have had to include restorative topics but this has not been too problematic as there is a clear Scope of Practice for each profession which makes it easy to know what to deliver.

IFDH have a different challenge as Dental Therapy is slightly different in each member country and although some countries practice what the UK consider to be the Scope of a DTh, others do not. It seems wise to be more inclusive but I don't think it would be easy to go as far as the UK did and change the name of the organisation.

Adding a membership category which allows anyone who also practices the accepted Scope/Remit of Dental Hygiene within their role would be a positive step forward for the IFDH in my opinion and will hopefully prevent a new organisation from setting up that could potentially weaken the impact that the Federation currently has.

It is widely accepted that in the UK we have an Association for Dental Therapists and a Society for Dental Hygienists and Therapists. We are both invited to attend events and consultations that affect our working practices and we work together on larger projects and proposals. However, it is sometimes difficult for a newly qualified DTh to decide which organisation to become a member of as it is too costly, as a graduate, to join both.

With the benefit of hindsight, further discussions with members would have been useful before putting it to the vote as our AGM was held face to face at the National Conference where many

members did not attend. Regional Group Committees did not enjoy having to field questions on the changes that seemed like they had been brought in quickly, without consultation. If we had spent more time canvassing opinion from members and had the opportunity to explain that we were 'future proofing' the organisation, we may have had a more positive response.

Frequently Asked Questions (from 2006)

Will our conferences change?

Yes, they will have to provide lectures and workshops that include paediatric and restorative care but there will be options that will be suited to the role of a DH at the same time.

Why are we changing our name?

With the advent of the new BSc degree in Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy that most Universities are developing, the Association needs to be inclusive and welcome those who will be practicing both DH and DTh in their daily work.

Will the identity of Dental Hygienists be lost?

No. In years to come, most members will be qualified as both DH and DTh's as there are fewer educational establishments offering a DH only course. With this in mind, the Association needs to move forward and consider its future members and what they will need to support them.

Will it cost money to change the name?

Yes. This will need to be altered in many ways and we will need the help of a legal team. The new Society will have to be registered as such under Companies House and the 'rules and articles' will need to be updated and approved. It will take up to 4 months.

Was this discussed with the members before being proposed?

Not as well as it could have been. It was discussed at length at Exec and then taken to Council, It was by no means a unanimous vote but it was sufficient to be taken to the AGM where it was narrowly passed. When the news was announced, some members, who were not able to attend the AGM, were not happy that the decision appeared to come 'out of the blue'.