

Dental Anxiety Management Techniques of North Carolina Dental Hygienists

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Purpose: To evaluate dental anxiety management techniques (DAMTs) by dental hygienists (DHs) in North Carolina (NC); to (1) determine DAMTs that are frequently utilized; and (2) gauge knowledge, willingness to implement, and confidence among NC DHs on DAMTs.

Methods: This study (UNC IRB #23-2406) included a Qualtrics survey that collected quantitative and qualitative data regarding NC DH's experience with DAMTs. Question types included multiple choice, select-all, Likert-scale, and open-ended on the categories: demographics, knowledge, education, clinical experience, confidence, and willingness. The survey was distributed to registered NC DHs using an email list from the NC dental board. Descriptive statistics, multivariate analysis ($p < 0.05$), and thematic analysis were for data interpretation.

Results: Survey participants included 632 NC DHs. Most (99%) reported treating a patient with dental anxiety. Over one-third (36%) reported lack of education on DAMTs at their educational institution and poor preparedness utilizing DAMTs post-education (4.90 on a 0-10 scale). Verbal DAMTs were more frequently learned during education by participants aged 18-34 compared to participants 55+ at a statistically significant rate. The following DAMTs were most recognized and utilized by participants: positive reinforcements and trust building (98%), information and explanation (96%), and music (88%). Participants reported confidence (99%) treating patients with dental anxiety and willingness (99%) to modify care using DAMTs. Qualitative themes identified from open-ended responses included trust, communication, and empathy.

Conclusion: Although participants reported regularly treating patients with dental anxiety, there was limited knowledge and utilization on the various DAMTs. Respondents expressed interest in continuing dental anxiety management education.

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