RESEARCH

"THE NATION'S NETWORK"

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RESEARCH TRACK AT CLL
The National Dental PBRN — "The Nation’s Network"

By Josh Snyder

Introduction

It's late on a Monday afternoon, January 14 to be exact. For educators at Normandale Community College, it's not just any Monday afternoon — it is the first day of class. It's a long day, a tiring one. Students arrive at varying levels of preparedness, and professors are often too preoccupied to do anything other than get their classes under way.

Debra Sidd, RDH, MEd, has every right to be tired, preoccupied. It is, after all, one of the most hectic days of the year. But she manages to set aside some time that afternoon to speak about something close to her heart, a passion of hers. And every time you mention the Nation’s Network, you can hear her smiling over the phone.

"I think what's exciting about this is that you have practitioners actually doing the research right in their clinical practice.”

What Sidd is referring to is the National Dental Practice-Based Research Network, or the Nation’s Network for short. And for dental hygienists like Sidd, it is changing the way they think about their career.

What Is the Nation's Network?

The Nation’s Network is the first national dental health practice-based research network (PBRN) in the country, funded by a $66.8 million grant from the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR). Of course, this begs the question, "What is a PBRN?" The Nation’s Network defines a PBRN as “a group of outpatient care practices that, although primarily devoted to providing health care services, has affiliated as a group — and typically with an academic health center — to investigate research questions and to share experiences and expertise. The network constitutes an organization that transcends any single research project.”

The Nation’s Network covers six regions over all 50 states, and each region has a headquarters that oversees activity in their region. Four regions are housed in dental schools, while the other two are housed in health practices.

Sarah Basile, RDH, MPH, is a regional coordinator for the Midwest region of the Nation’s Network. According to Basile, the roots of the network go back to 2005, when NIDCR funded three dental health care networks throughout the country — one on the west coast, one on the east coast and one that was scattered across many different states and regions. In 2012, NIDCR decided to consolidate these three networks into one, and to include areas not previously covered.

Basile, who works out of HealthPartners Institute for Education and Research in Minneapolis, Minn., said the Nation’s Network is aimed at getting the entire dental team to join.
"The network welcomes hygienists, dentists, dental specialists and now they just opened it up to welcome administrators and dental assistants to enroll."

Membership in the network is free, and although entire offices are encouraged to join, individuals can join and still see the same benefits. But what exactly does the network do? Basile said that the main goal is to conduct practice-based research studies.

"Our goal is to publish research and get the practitioner involved, and find out what is relevant to the practitioner, because in academic settings, a lot of times the people who do that type of research are not close to the issues faced in day-to-day clinical practice," she said. "By taking the route of getting the practitioner involved and finding out what is relevant to clinical practice, that's sort of the goal of this type of research."

But how does the network find these research studies and get members to conduct them? As Basile illustrated, the answer to this question is what makes PBRNs unique.

"A researcher, a clinician, it could be really anybody, comes up with a clinical question," Basile said. "They work that into a proposal, and then it's submitted to a committee. They give the thumbs up/thumbs down on the particular studies. They decide if it's relevant to practice-based research, if it's relevant to what's going on in dentistry, if it's feasible."

For Basile, the things that separate the research funded by the network from traditional scientific research are how it's conducted and the questions it strives to answer.

"So these dentists and hygienists do these studies in their clinical setting. The idea is that it's different than academic research. It takes a long time for academic research to really translate into practice and for things to change. This gets the practitioners engaged in the process of change, from generating study ideas to being part of a study team to implementing them into practice."

"I think what's exciting about this is that you have practitioners actually doing the research right in their clinical practice."

—Debra Sidd, RDH, MEd

Why Join the Network?

Each fall semester, Sidd teaches a BS degree evidence-based course for Metropolitan State University in partnership with Normandale Community College. When she first began teaching this research course, she recalled not knowing where to start, and so she reached out for help. It was then that she first learned of the Nation's Network.

"When I got engaged in working with [the Nation's Network], doors opened up," she said.

Sidd was immediately drawn to the dental team approach that the network highlighted. She quickly applied everything she learned from the network to her course, and made it a personal goal to get as many dental hygienists involved with the network as possible. And with her sabbatical approaching, she found the perfect opportunity to do just that. She spent that time creating an evidence-based dentistry symposium that focused on getting dental health care workers to practice evidence-based decision making. And the network became a big portion of that symposium.

"It's an emphasis now that we're trying to get more and more hygienists aware of the network, because sometimes it's the hygienist that brings the motivation to the practice."

Motivation is what drew Jennifer Guidoni, RDH, to the network. Guidoni has been a dental hygienist for 29 years, working in a clinical setting in Florida. She realized early on in her career that she was a lifetime student and was always looking for ways to not only broaden her horizons, but for ways to help her patients.

Her journey to the network began three years ago, when her dentist convinced her to join what was then a regional PBRN. She transitioned to the Nation's Network, a decision she is glad she made, because it offered her a new motivation.

"As I've grown in dental hygiene, you see the young, inexperienced hygienists come forward, and they have an idealistic view of the world," Guidoni said. "You want to be as inspired as they are. The problem you see is that you, on a daily basis, keep coming up against the same obstacles. As time goes by, you often feel like you can hit a wall."

Sensing an opportunity to break through that wall, Guidoni joined the network and began conducting research right in her practice. She said the experience was immediately fulfilling and made her feel like she was starting her career all over again.

"By participating in hygiene and dental research, and gathering information that can better the world, you are moving on with your own education, which makes you inspired with your own job."

While Guidoni saw the personal benefits, she also saw how this renewed sense of purpose was being passed on to her patients.

She realized that, by keeping up-to-date on the latest clinical research, her patients were getting the most scientifically sound treatment. And given how intelligent the modern patient is about health care, Guidoni said that this knowledge couldn't have come at a better time.

"[Patients] have access to the latest technologies and the latest research. And unless you really are one who continues to strive for a continued education in hygiene, you really can be left behind in an archaic type of practice. And the patients that are coming up now are much more educated in their own medical and dental health than ever before, and if you don't have the knowledge of the latest technique ... they move on, they are educated enough to realize that your practice is outdated."

"A hygienist is supposed to be a dental health educator. When you're doing research, and you're part of a research group, then you're going to be getting the latest and greatest information from"
that research group, which is going to be changing the world and the environment around you."

What Are the Benefits of Joining?

As Guidoni points out, the world of the dental health educator is a constantly changing world. Keeping current on the latest research can be the difference between a booming practice and one that has to close its doors.

For Kimberly Johnson, RDH, MDH, the benefit of joining the Nation’s Network was having access to all of that research and to be a researcher herself.

"Research is one of the roles of the dental hygienist," Johnson said. "I've always felt strongly that we need to increase our own dental hygiene body of knowledge."

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—Kimberly Johnson, RDH, MDH

"This is a really good way to do it. It can bring everything together. The everyday clinician can be involved — they can help to plan it, to implement it, to work in the research environment, but still really be involved in clinical dental hygiene as well. I think it's a win-win."

For Johnson, there is more than personal motivation at play here. She sees in the network an opportunity for the profession to fulfill a moral obligation.

"I go back to that body of knowledge. I really think that we need to increase that body of knowledge. Everyday questions that you have in practice aren’t always answered by research. I believe that both types of research have a place, but the network is a really good way to involve everyday clinicians and to apply that knowledge gained directly back into practice."

Providing better patient care is an obvious benefit, but there are other aspects that are unique to the Nation’s Network that Johnson sees, one of which is networking with practices in other states. Because practice acts vary from state to state, being part of a national network that can centralize all of this information for members is invaluable.

"I think it’s good to learn what other parts of the country do. I think there are some basic differences in how we approach practice, and I think bringing it into a network helps us to bring that all together, and put it out there so that you can see those differences but also so you can see how someone else is applying basic knowledge."

"We always think that we’re doing what’s best for our patients, but we always don’t have the dental science behind it. I think this will help us to answer some of those questions that, yes, we are doing the right things, and that it helps improve care."

How Do Students Benefit?

When Sidd taught her evidence-based decision making course, she saw an opportunity to get students involved with clinical research early. She asked her students to look into the network, and the results were promising.

"Having their awareness of this throughout their curriculum and getting engaged this early, you know this is going to be something that they will value when they get out there into practice," Sidd said.

One of her students, Michelle Hardesty, RDH, decided that she wanted to join the network after listening to Sidd speak about it. Hardesty, who currently works in a clinical practice and is new to the world of PBRNs, was excited by the opportunities the network provided her.

"It looked like an exciting thing to do, to get involved and to be part of emerging research," she said, adding that the opportunity to keep track of trends in data presents a new avenue for trying different tactics in the clinical office.

As she began to pore over the volumes of research at her disposal, she realized that the network was more than a chance to conduct research, or to network with other practices — it was an information treasure trove, one that can help any dental hygienist looking to do something different within the profession.

"It’s kind of a starting-off point. If you’re interested in changing careers and had an inclination toward research, or if you’re looking to shake things up in your practice, if it’s kind of ho-hum or you’re
looking for new ways to do things or new tools for patient education, I think it would help.

“If nothing else, it’s another avenue to gather information. It’s another resource.”

As a student, Hardesty cannot suggest study topics or take the lead on any research. However, she doesn’t see this as a roadblock and said that what makes the network so great is its accessibility.

“The thing I was most concerned about when I started is that I wanted to be involved, but what if my practice doesn’t want to be involved?”

Fortunately, not everyone has to get involved in order to get the full benefits of membership.

“It doesn’t have to be like that, which I really think is great. Not everybody is going to want to participate, not everybody is going to want to think about those things.

“But for those [who do], the research is desperately needed, and to have people that are really excited about it, and are able to apply it in their lives is great, too.”

“For somebody that is skeptical, I would just say enroll. You don’t have to enroll as a full participant, you can enroll just on an information level.”

—Sarah Basile, RDH, MPH

**Conclusion**

PBRNs like the Nation’s Network are providing a chance for the entire dental team to come together to research and study the problems dental health care faces. Basile can understand why someone might read this and be skeptical, but she has seen first-hand that it doesn’t take long for the skeptics to become believers.

“Some of our champion practitioners started out as skeptics,” Basile said. “For somebody that is skeptical, I would just say enroll. You don’t have to enroll as a full participant, you can enroll just on an information level.”

Her hope is that the Nation’s Network will take off the same way that medical PBRNs did, and that they will continue to answer the pressing clinical questions of the day, and that the entire dental team will be collaborating to provide patients with the best care they can while strengthening the profession.

“This network is for everyone, it’s for all of us as practitioners together. It’s a gift given to us. The federal government could have given this almost $70 million to anything they wanted to.

“It’s a great opportunity for our profession to do this work.”

**References**

1. http://www.nationaldentalpbrn.org/about.php

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