

Dental Hygiene Profession Founder: Ester Wilkins became a dental hygienist at a time when few women were practicing dentists. The year was 1939. She continued her education to become a dentist and earned her dental degree from Boston's Tufts University's School of Dental Medicine in 1949.

Shortly thereafter, the University of Washington recruited her to start a dental hygiene program. This was a mammoth challenge for any brand new dentist but especially a new female dentist in the male-dominated practice of dentistry. Among other initiatives, it involved developing a curriculum, teaching most of the classes, hiring faculty, and overseeing implementation of the program.

Dr. Wilkins did it, and did it extraordinarily well. By 1950 she had launched a bachelor's degree program and a degree completion program in dental hygiene at UW and served as the program director for its first ten years. She was to eventually become officially recognized as the founder of the profession of dental hygiene.

Her textbook, *Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist*, was published in 1959. In it she laid out her ambition for hygienists to think of themselves as prevention specialists who educated patients on dental hygiene such as how to avoid cavities and inflamed gums, and to adopt healthy hygiene habits.

"She set the standard for how everybody began to teach dental hygiene, and that was the tipping point," said Ann Battrell, the chief executive of the American Dental Hygienists' Association. At the time, hygienists typically worked in schools, instructing children how to prevent tooth decay and some dentists gradually started hiring hygienists to remove patients' plaque and tartar, as well as to perform other dental duties.

In 1964 Dr. Wilkins returned to Massachusetts to earn her periodontology certification at Tufts School of Dental Medicine where she stayed as a clinical professor. Upon retiring, she continued to serve as an emeritus clinical professor of periodontology and also continued to lecture, mentor, and advocate well into her 90s.

Dr. Wilkins presented programs in all fifty states as well as in Canada, Japan, China, Saudi Arabia, Ireland, Italy, Israel, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. She was known by hygienists around the world as the author of her textbook, its 12th edition published in 2016, and was affectionately referred to as the godmother of modern dental hygiene.

Dr. Wilkins held a dental degree, a dental hygiene certification and specialty certification in periodontics. But even after she became a dentist, she continued to proudly list her RDH credentials.



At the age of 100, on December 12, 2016, Dr. Wilkins, who had received many honors over the years, passed away from complications of a stroke just four days before she was scheduled to receive a Dean's Medal, the highest honor given by a dean of a school at Tufts University, recognizing those who have made significant contributions to their school and the greater community. Respectfully I add, the world.

Sources:

*<https://dental.washington.edu/dr-esther-wilkins-founder-uw-dental-hygiene-program-dies-100/>

*<http://www.dentistryiq.com/articles/2016/12/dr-esther-wilkins-dental-hygiene-icon-passes-away.html>

* http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/health/esther-wilkins-who-set-standards-for-dental-hygienists-dies-at-100.html?module=WatchingPortal®ion=c-column-middle-span-region&pgType=Homepage&action=click&mediaId=thumb_square&state=standard&contentPlacement=9&version=internal&contentCollection=www.nytimes.com&contentId=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2016%2F12%2F19%2Fhealth%2Festher-wilkins-who-set-standards-for-dental-hygienists-dies-at-100.html&eventName=Watching-article-click&_r=0