

Dental Hygiene Movement Started in Bridgeport, Connecticut

The field of dental hygiene didn't exist until the early 1900s. Connecticut dentist Alfred Fones established the world's first school for dental hygienists in 1913.

Dr. Fones, who practiced in Bridgeport, Connecticut, became convinced that preventive dentistry was critical to oral health. This was a relatively new concept in dentistry. After all, it was only in 1890 that Willoughby D. Miller discovered that bacteria caused tooth decay.

In 1905, Dr. Fones trained his office assistant (and cousin), Irene Newman, to clean teeth and perform other preventive treatments on children. She became the world's first dental hygienist.

The benefits of periodic dental prophylaxis quickly became apparent. Dr. Fones launched a program to make oral prophylactic treatment available to Bridgeport schoolchildren. At the same time, he established a school for dental hygienists.

The first classes took place in a garage behind his carriage-house office at 10 Washington Avenue in Bridgeport. The faculty included the deans of the dental schools of Pennsylvania and Harvard, seven professors from Yale and two from Columbia, plus noted practitioners from throughout the world.

Twenty-seven students graduated in 1915 from the first class. Many went on to jobs with the Bridgeport school district, where they played a significant role in reducing dental caries in schoolchildren by 75%.

Today, the Fones School of Dental Hygiene is located at the University of Bridgeport, not far from the grounds of the old carriage house. There are now more than 200 dental hygiene schools and 120,000 registered dental hygienists in the United States.