

ESTHER M. WILKINS
CLASS OF 1933

Following her graduation from Simmons College of Boston with a degree in science, and earning a certificate at the nearby Forsyth School for Dental Hygienists the next year, Esther was accepted into the Tufts University School of Dental Medicine, class of 1948. At the time, less than 2 percent of U.S. dentists were women.

Soon after she graduated with a Doctor of Dental Medicine degree from Tufts School of Dental Medicine in 1949, the University of Washington recruited Esther to start a dental hygiene program. In 1950, she is credited with establishing a dental hygiene program at the University of Washington, serving as the program director for 10 years. Esther developed the curriculum and taught most of the courses offered.

Her lessons plans formed the basis of her seminal textbook. Realizing a need for up-to-date textbooks on dental hygiene, Esther began writing and mimeographing handouts for her students. Over the years, the stack of papers accumulated and soon Esther was approached by a textbook seller about turning her writing into a book. It was at the University of Washington School of Dentistry that she published "Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist."

The first edition of Clinical Practice of the Dental Hygienist was published in 1960. The book has since become a cornerstone of text in dental hygiene programs. Updated editions of the textbook were released by Esther through its 12th edition in 2016. The book has been translated into many languages, including Japanese, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, and Canadian French and is used in dental hygiene schools around the world.

The book's success made Wilkins one of the world's most sought-after speakers on dental-hygiene issues. As of 2006, she had spoken at universities and conventions in every state, as well as Japan, Australia, Italy and Israel. According to the Tufts profile, as of 2012, Esther has taught more than 800 continuing-education courses. "In the world of dental hygiene, I would say she is the most well known, most respected and most loved person." Dr. Timothy Hempton, then assistant director of periodontology at Tufts told The Sun in 2006.

After 12 years at the University of Washington, Esther returned to the Tufts University School of Dental Medicine to earn an Advanced Periodontal Certification in 1966. She became a clinical professor at the university's School of Dentistry in 1966 and taught there for 45 years.

Esther received a number of awards and recognition. In 2016 she was awarded the Tufts University School of Dental Medicine Dean's Medal and on December 9, 2006 the city of Boston declared the Esther M. Wilkins Day.

She was married to James Gallagher, an assistant professor at Tufts, until his death in 1988. According to Maria Perno Goldie, RDH, a well-known author and former ADHS president, "She is known as the godmother of dental hygiene, and loved to focus on prevention." Esther passed away on December 12th at the age 100.