

Changing the attitudes and behaviours of patients

To break the habits of a lifetime, it is invariably necessary to change attitudes and behaviours. Habits such as snacking between meals, preferring high sugar content foods and beverages, and tooth brushing once a day only, let alone addictive habits, notably smoking and other tobacco use, are generally at best modified by oral health education. And more often than not any lessons learnt and good intentions stemming from oral health education tend to be short lived, unless the health messages are frequently reinforced.

To effect real change in the oral health of a patient with habits which have a negative impact on their oral health status, it is necessary to encourage and support the patient in breaking the habits, possible one at a time or in combination. Often many a times, it is necessary to impress on the patient that they must assume responsibility for their oral health, with what they do on a day to day basis being much more important than any procedures you, as their dentist or other oral healthcare professional, undertakes as the occasional 'visitor' in their mouth. Dentists and their oral healthcare teams do not look after teeth, gums and oral soft tissues, they primarily provide preventive advice and associated measures, intervene when the patient needs professional help to enhance and maintain their oral health, and carry out procedures to treat disease, trauma and wear and tear when indicated clinically.

The psychology of attitudinal and behavioural change is complex and beyond the scope of this editorial. It is suggested however, that there is good opportunity to effect change in many patients' attitudes and behaviours, at a time when a broad range of societal shifts in population social norms and beliefs is presently occurring. The societal shifts of relevance to oral health, which it is acknowledged are occurring in different social strata and populations at different rates, included amongst others, improved oral hygiene, linked to improved personal hygiene in general; reduced smoking rates, with those who continue to smoke being encouraged to at least reduce their consumption of tobacco; reduced use of table sugar and increased use of sweeteners, with most sugar consumption being in processed foods and soft drinks; the now almost universal use of fluoride toothpastes and the increasing use of a wide range of hygiene aids and increasing interests in dental attractiveness and retaining a functional dentition throughout life.

Whatever form of dentistry you practice, you should find your patients to be more amenable and prepared than ever before to breaking habits through attitudinal and behavioural change in favour of oral health- and associated general health and well being gains in particular, if the patient has a chronic, systemic condition, such as diabetes, which may be aggravated by poor oral health or their future success and happiness may be compromised by unhealthy and unsightly teeth and gums. Needless to say, in every population there are individuals, usually the socially disadvantaged and others for whatever reason, find it difficult to help themselves, who do not follow societal shifts. As a consequence, societal shifts with beneficial health effects tend, as a negative effect, to accentuate health inequalities. Changes in oral health systems and policies, rather than changes in attitudes and behaviours, are required to address these inequalities-the key to success in dealing with oral health inequalities being considered to be targeted, accessible, affordable, if not free, responsive and appropriate dental services.

In the meantime, it is suggested that dental professionals individually and collectively, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally should not miss the window of opportunity provided by present and any future societal shifts to encourage and support patients in breaking habits which compromise their oral health. If successful, dentistry may have a greatly increased and longer lasting impact on lifestyles and future healthcare costs, with many more patients enjoying the benefit of improved oral health and the prospect of teeth for life. No better time to make new, determined efforts to encourage and support patients in breaking habits which compromise oral health.



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