

# Relationships between physicians and dentists becoming increasingly more important

The relationship between medical conditions treated by physicians and dental health has been very widely acknowledged in medical and dental literature. It seems as though a new study supporting this realization appears every week in one journal or another. I personally have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work closely with several medical doctors, local chiropractors, and physical therapists in improving the overall health of our mutual patients. We have worked together to identify and treat chronic headaches, prevent complications of surgical procedures, identify artery blockages with advanced imaging techniques, and to track histories of high blood pressures. I look forward to the day when more physicians will routinely request dental consultations before initiating extensive medical treatments.

For at least a decade, it has been considered the standard of care for a patient to receive clearance from a dentist before undergoing elective joint replacement therapy or heart surgery because the medical community has recognized the important relationship between dental health and its effect on the healing process. Since we know that gum disease is closely linked with premature births and low birth weights, obstetricians can provide better care of their patients by working closely with their patients' dentists. The strong correlation between gum dis-



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ease and stroke, diabetes, depression, atherosclerosis, and heart disease suggests overwhelmingly that dentists and physicians should be working closely together on nearly every patient. Since many of the medications for treating osteoporosis and osteopenia have been reported to carry significant dental-related side effects as risks, the role of dentists in evaluating patients thoroughly before these medications are initiated is becoming increasingly more important. Treatment of sleep apnea, which has been identified as a major contributing factor in stroke and shortened life span, now often includes the collaboration between sleep physicians and specifically trained dentists. Furthermore, many medications dramatically alter the normal flora of the mouth and contribute to chronic dry mouth and increased incidence of tooth decay.

As important as the collaboration between physicians and dentists is, the relationship between these two branches of healthcare community remains relatively incongruous. There are, of course, many reasons for this unfortunate situation. Sometimes time constraints make it difficult for proper communi-

cation to occur. It may be that because dental terminology and medical terminology may be drastically different for the same condition. However, it may also be that we as professionals are simply not aware of how important it is to communicate with each other for the welfare of our patients.

Patients should always take the responsibility upon themselves to make sure that whoever is treating them, whether it be a physician, a surgeon, a chiropractor, a physical therapist, or a dentist, knows their entire medical history thoroughly. It may even be wise, and it certainly is appropriate, to request collaboration between all members of the healthcare team. This is the only way to know that all healthcare providers will be "on the same page", even if they disagree on the approach to a given treatment. The mouth is part of the body, and treatment of the mouth affects the body just as treatment of the body affects the mouth!

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