

Editorial

THE MOUTH AS WINDOW TO THE BODY



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

In 2000, the *British Medical Journal* ran a series of articles called the *ABC of oral health*, to give physicians an insight into the management of a whole range of oral conditions. The editor observed that, because dentists tend to concentrate on fixing teeth, there is a gap in the treatment of oral disorders that is ripe for physicians to fill.

Far from accepting this premise, 2 reports recently published in North America call for expanding the scope and vision of dentists to include overall health as being within our realm. The U.S. *Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health* proclaimed that a growing body of evidence links oral and general health. The American Dental Association's *Future of Dentistry* report predicts a major rise in the demand for dental services, if the connection can be proven to be substantial.

CDA is highlighting the importance of oral health to general health as part

of its messaging in April, during Dental Health Month 2002. This may lead to more of your patients asking questions about a relationship they may not have heretofore given much thought to. For this reason, we have devoted the current edition of *JCDA* to several review articles that give you the state of the science with regard to the connections between oral health and general health.

One article examines the relationships between edentulism and poor nutrition; it concludes there is ample evidence to show that having no teeth has a major influence on dietary intake. The authors also show that dental implant-borne prostheses can facilitate the consumption of more nutritious foods.

Drs. Chris Lavelle, Debora Matthews and Tim McGaw review the relationships between periodontal disease and cardiovascular disease, diabetes and preterm, low-birth-weight babies, respectively. These relationships were highlighted in the *Surgeon General's Report*. My reading of the bottom line of these reviews is that there does seem to be an association between the oral and systemic conditions, although we have no proof of a cause-and-effect relationship.

There is a distinct possibility that, rather than periodontal disease being an independent risk factor for these systemic conditions, the host response to pathogens, their endotoxins or their inflammatory mediators may be similar in people at risk for the oral and systemic conditions in question. Periodontal disease may therefore be a marker for these conditions, rather than a causative factor.

This train of thought is reflected also in the published summaries of presentations made at a symposium on "Periodontal Health and Systemic Disorders," held at the University of Western Ontario in September 2001. The authors conclude that host

responses to periodontal pathogens correlate significantly to certain systemic conditions and that studies now underway should help to explain the complex nature of these relationships. The authors hope that this research will open new diagnostic and treatment possibilities for dentists. They also boldly predict that "the use of molecular determinants for assessing the risks of systemic inflammation will be an integral part of the clinical practice."

Dr. Herenia Lawrence develops the theme of the mouth being a window to the body with her review of the use of saliva as a marker for a whole range of systemic conditions. She believes that advances in microbiology, immunology and biochemistry will lead to the widespread use of saliva as an aid to researchers, clinicians and the public in bringing about improvements in general health.

Given that oral health research holds such hope for future improvements in general health, Dr. Howard Tenenbaum poses a very provocative question when he asks if we should even be thinking in terms of classifying the type of work done by him and his colleagues as "dental research."

Breaking down the barriers isolating dentistry from medicine seems to be the way forward for our science-based profession. The future will hardly see our profession solely preoccupied with mechanically fixing teeth. In an era of changing and overlapping scopes of practice, we have nothing to fear from those snapping at our heels. Let's look ahead, not behind.

On a final unrelated note, please do us a big favour by completing the survey that accompanies this edition. I thank you in anticipation.

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