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Promotion of Oral Health: Need for Interprofessional Collaboration

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"The Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health in America (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000) and, more recently, the National Call to Action to Promote Oral Health (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003) emphasized the need for partnerships of key stake holders to get involved in oral disease prevention. Interventions aimed at promoting healthy outcomes and preventing disease should include a focus on oral health." ¹

You are probably thinking that the excerpt above was extracted from a dental or dental hygiene publication? Maybe it was taken from a dental public health journal? I am pleased to tell you that the entire January/February 2008 issue of *The American Journal of Maternal Child Nursing* (MCN) was devoted to oral health. Among the many valuable and informative articles was the theme that nurses are in an "ideal position to provide health promotion and education and screening across the multitude of settings in which they work regarding oral health and risk factors for oral disease."

Why are nurses an ideal profession in which to collaborate to promote oral health? As written by Clemmens and Kerr¹ in their article titled, "Improving oral health in women: Nurses' call to action," nursing practice entails "promotion and protection of individual and population health and prevention of disease and disability." The practice of nursing involves assessment, planning, teaching, counseling and direct care, and policy and advocacy for target patient groups. Does this

sound familiar? Dental hygienists do much of the same. They also assess, plan, teach, counsel, and provide direct care...as well as provide input into policy and advocacy for patient populations. The authors note that oral health has not been a high nursing priority in the past however they stress that NOW is the time to increase nursing's awareness, knowledge, and skills about the impact of good oral health.

Why is nursing taking such a bold step now? The medical and nursing professions are beginning to read the science in dentistry and realize that there truly is an oral-systemic connection. While we do not know if a causal relationship exists for many of the areas under study (ie, adverse pregnancy outcomes, cardiovascular disease and stroke, diabetes, etc), we have no doubt that optimal oral health can only be beneficial for every person.

There has been little interaction between nursing and dentistry or dental hygiene.² In the past, nurses have had little interest in getting involved in oral health issues. A 2001 study reported that nurse practitioners did not think oral health screening was their responsibility and only 35% correctly identified oral disease risk factors. A recent study conducted by Thomas et al at the University of North Carolina surveyed 504 nurse practitioners (NP), physician assistants (PA), and nurse midwives (NMW) regarding knowledge, behaviors and opinions about periodontal disease, and adverse pregnancy outcomes. Two hundred and forty practitioners responded (48%). Sixty-three percent perform an oral health exam at the initial visit only. Only 20% agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge about periodontal disease is current. All agreed that NP, PA, and NMW should be taught about periodontal disease, and 95% agreed they should collaborate with dental professionals to reduce a patient's risk of having an adverse pregnancy outcome.³

However, there is little integration of oral health education in the curricula of nursing programs.⁴ And it does not appear that much is being done regarding interprofessional collaboration and education in dental hygiene. For example, a 2007 national study of dental hygiene program directors regarding oral-systemic disease content in their curricula found that 99% of the directors think dental hygienists will serve an important role in the future with assessment of oral-systemic disease. Yet, only 4% have content taught with other professionals such as nursing or allied students.⁵

Dental hygiene must take a lead and reach out to nursing and other health care professionals and collaborate to promote optimal oral care. There are 2.3 million nurses working in the United States. Studies have shown that nursing interventions are effective in promoting health and preventing disease in the US population. But in order for this to occur, education has to take place. Nurses need to know how to perform oral health evaluation and how to make referrals to dental hygienists and others in the dental profession. Nurses and dental hygienists must not continue to work in silos, each looking at only certain aspects of the body. Why can't dental hygienists play a vital role in tobacco cessation, high blood pressure detection, cholesterol and diabetes screening, determination of risk factors for cardiovascular disease, counseling about nutrition and obesity-all with the intent of making timely referrals to the most appropriate medical or nursing professional.

I think the future is bright for our profession. But we must reach out and collaborate with our medical professionals and teach them about oral health. It sounds like the door is open if we will just begin taking the necessary steps.

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