



Report of the Global Oral Health Inequalities Task Group on Periodontal Disease: Implications for Dental Hygienists

I read a fascinating paper published this month in *Advances in Dental Research*. It was a report from the Global Oral Health Inequalities Task Group on Periodontal Disease.¹ The full report describes the oral health inequities in several areas of oral disease and the priorities for research in the future. Following is a brief summary of the report pertaining to periodontal disease and the impact and implications for dental hygienists.

Did you know that 90% of the global population has experienced oral or dental problems?² These figures are staggering when one considers that most oral disease is completely preventable. Several risk factors for periodontal disease were listed including poor oral hygiene, tobacco smoking, drug use, poor dental restorations and others linked to hyper-inflammatory polymorphisms, such as uncontrolled diabetes mellitus, obesity, untreated HIV infection and genetic variables.¹ We know that tobacco smoking is one of the risk factors that is the most important to reduce because its impact on periodontal disease risk is so great. We have made great strides over the years in educating our patients about the role of tobacco and diabetes mellitus, and how it can impact poor oral health and overall health. Yet many people around the world do not have the benefit of this education because they lack access to an oral care provider who can help them learn the benefits of good preventive care. We also lack understanding about the benefits of integrating oral health education into programs designed to promote general health and prevent chronic diseases.¹ While we think it would be beneficial and contribute to better oral health, it is a research priority to learn the most effective and efficient ways to conduct these programs. Dental hygienists have always been about prevention and education. They could play a huge role in the future in implementing these proposed strategies to alleviate periodontal disease.

The report further discussed the importance of oral health services, as well as patient compliance. Dental hygienists have known that professional oral care is key to prevention of disease and to the treatment and maintenance of periodontal disease. Just as important is the

patient's commitment to regular, supportive periodontal care and adherence to instructions from an oral health care professional. Yet we still know little about what it takes to modify behavior. More research is needed to learn how to motivate patients towards better compliance and adherence. Perhaps dental hygiene investigators could take the lead in investigating strategies to modify behavior.

The report provides several reasons for the failure to implement effective strategies that have evidence from clinical and laboratory studies. The first is a lack of awareness that leads to delayed treatment. The public and even some oral health care professionals lack awareness of the importance of periodontal health and the consequences of not treating the disease. This has a huge impact on the health, or lack thereof, of the public. The second is one that really "hits home" - the lack of appropriate oral health care systems and the availability of qualified oral health care professionals, such as dental hygienists in developing countries. Many countries do not have any oral care, much less a dental hygienist. Much more needs to be done to expand the availability of dental hygiene programs throughout the world so that everyone on this planet has access to care. Third, much more needs to be done to reimburse providers for preventive services, including health maintenance. Finally, more needs to be accomplished in collaborative care between medical and dental professionals. Although progress has been made, such as the joint recommendations by the Academy of Periodontology and the Journal of Cardiology, medical and dental professionals should be encouraged to work together to control common risk factors for oral and overall health.

Dental hygienists can make a difference in global health. I strongly recommend that each of you read this timely report and think about how you can make a contribution to periodontal health!

Sincerely,
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References

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