Interview: Consulting the Internet should in no way replace visiting the dentist

By Dental Tribune International

Everyone has done it—searching for symptoms on the Internet. Recent statistics show that searches for dental and mouth-related problems are very common in Europe. On average, Europeans generate over 200,000 searches per month for toothache alone. This benefits patients by assisting them in taking responsibility for their own health, but unfortunately self-diagnosing on the Internet can sometimes do more harm than good. Self-diagnosis can fuel anxiety and hypochondria, and some websites provide unreliable information. In an interview with Dental Tribune International, Dr. Chuan Tang, of Full-Mall Medical in Manchester in the UK, shared some tips for dental professionals on how to educate patients about this matter.

Dr. Tang, according to the statistics released by LenoStore, dental and oral health-related searches are very common. What do you think the reasons are for so many people consulting the Internet?

Easy accessibility is just one of the many reasons why dental and oral health-related searches are common. Not everyone has access to a dentist, and the Internet has given patients the ability to find information at their own convenience, especially during a global pandemic where many feel uncomfortable going to a clinic or are unable to make an appointment. Furthermore, searching for information on symptoms allows patients to take some responsibility for their own health. They can reassuringly themselves by finding relevant information written by healthcare professionals on a variety of reliable websites.

What advice would you give to dentists who are dealing with patients who search for information about their symptoms on the Internet and either come in too often because they are scared or come in too late because they thought they could self-manage and were unsuccessful?

If patients insist on researching their symptoms online, make them aware of the websites they should avoid. Encourage them to use only reliable websites that provide helpful information, as these sites will usually tell them what the red flags are and when they should consult a healthcare professional. Dentists can also offer patients different ways in which to contact them in order to prevent them coming in too often. Offering patients the chance to have consultations via email, text or even video call can be a great way to determine whether further action is required, and this is beneficial for both dentist and patient. It is important to remember that prevention is the key with most diseases—if something is caught early, it can be managed better. Referring to patients that there is nothing wrong with checking their symptoms on the Internet, but this should only be done in order to assist their understanding of their condition and should in no way replace the dentist.

People will probably continue to check online for information about their symptoms despite the risks, simply because it is so tempting and convenient. How can dental healthcare professionals help guide their patients to the right resources? What should be the ultimate goal in the dentist–patient relationship?

As millions of people now own a smartphone, researching symptoms on the Internet has become second nature to so many of them. Firstly, it is important that dental healthcare professionals guide their patients to reliable information sources. The Internet can fuel anxiety and hypochondria, but unfortunately self-diagnosing the Internet could self-manage and be unsuccessful. The latter could be promoting their own products and presenting incorrect information that does not have patients’ best interests at heart. Lastly, openness is the most important factor for both patients and dentists and should be the ultimate goal. People will always research their symptoms online, but giving patients the confidence in what to do properly can prevent many unnecessary problems.

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