Scientists have created a solution that mimics the way the body forms new teeth - allowing natural repairs of holes without the need for drilling and filling.

Geographic location also played a particularly interesting role. Two out of three urban dentists in this survey do regular mailings. Half of suburban dentists do. Only one in five rural dentists report doing so.

Dentists emphasize the importance of dental web site design and internal marketing programs. "Dentists must offer services and make it known to their patients that they do, otherwise patients will seek it elsewhere," said one dentist. "We are not recognized by the public and not marketed by organized dentistry! Why?" asked a California dentist.

Many dental practices find internal marketing to be pleasantly profitable. "Internal marketing by far is the best bang for the buck," said an Illinois dentist. "In my well established practice, internal marketing has been successful for me," agreed an Ohio dentist.

Some feel that direct mail marketing is an old-fashioned dental practice marketing strategy. "Postal mailings are a complete waste of time," declared a California dentist. "Patients ask us not to send them any more junk mail. This is not the 1970’s." Some wonder if it's worth the investment. "It seems necessary, but it's hard to tell if it pays off," complained a California dentist. "Profitable enough, but very competitive," commented a South Korea dentist.

"Frankly, I can hardly believe that half of dentists are not sending out regular mailings!" sighed Jim Du Molen, dental practice management consultant and founder of The Wealthy Dentist. "Internal marketing programs are among the most profitable, so it amazes me that so many dentists are failing to keep in touch with their regular patients."
Laser technology spots cavities before they start
It might someday help lessen dentists' reliance on the dreaded drill

Using lasers to spot troubled teeth before cavities form, researchers hope to turn the dentist’s drill into a relic of the 20th century.

The technology, called “Raman spectroscopy” (RS), is not brand new. In fact, scientists in other fields have long been using it to distinguish between various chemicals, based on their unique molecular fingerprints.

But this is the first time RS has been used to identify teeth in the very earliest stages of decay, the British research team said.

“The technique we are working with can tell the difference between [healthy] enamel and decaying enamel, and so in the future, if this technology is further developed, a dentist could identify early decay using it,” explained study co-author Frances Downey, a graduate student with the Biomaterials, Biomimetics & Biophotonics Research Group operating out of the Dental Institute of King’s College London.

Results of what Downey and her colleagues refer to as a “preliminary” effort were reported at the Microscience 2008 conference held recently in London.

The new approach to cavity prevention might be available for practical use five years down the road, Downey said. For the moment, work has been conducted solely with already extracted teeth, rather than with actual patients.

Researchers took advantage of the fact that cavities develop when the acids produced by microorganisms found in dental plaque begin to demineralise tooth enamel and produce distinct chemical changes.

By focusing RS optical fibers on individual teeth, the authors were able to track the unique light patterns that emanate from chemical compositions on either healthy or decaying enamel.

Theoretically, such a process could quickly spot tooth decay at a much earlier stage than the current screening standard, which is based on visual exams and X-rays.

The result of such early detection might be cavity prevention, not repair, the researchers said. In essence, sites of decay could be remineralized with medicinal mouthwashes and fluoride varnishes, preventing the development of full-blown cavities and eliminating the need for dental drilling.

Study supervisor Dr. Frederic Festy said that larger studies involving patients are in the planning stages.

“However, that is not to say dentist drills would become obsolete,” said Downey. She and her team noted that, in its current form, the screening procedure would be both expensive and time-consuming. “I think there will always be those of us who like our sweets a bit too much, and visit the dentist too infrequently, to keep them in business,” she said.

But Charlie Brown, national counsel for Consumers for Dental Choice, based in Washington, D.C., hailed the innovation as an “excellent development.”

“Anything that means that there might be fewer filling materials used in the mouth is a tremendously positive development,” Brown said. “I salute any technology that will scan the mouth and prevent cavities before they occur, so we can try to have the least intervention in the mouth as possible.”

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