‘HIV tests should be offered in every dental practice’

By Daniel Zimmermann, DTI Group Editor

According to the latest figures from the United Nations organization UNAIDS, more than 34 million people worldwide are currently living with the HIV virus. Because it can take up to 10 years before progressing to AIDS, early testing can be a life-saving factor.

New tests for HIV checks in dental practices have recently been developed. Dental Tribune Asia Pacific met with Dr. Catrise Austin, who maintains a dental practice — VIP Smiles — on 57th Street in New York City, to speak about HIV testing in her practice and how such testing could help to create a heightened awareness of the disease amongst patients.

Dr. Austin, would you tell our readers the reason you decided to offer free HIV tests to your patients?

The idea for offering free HIV tests to my patients arose earlier this year once I had learnt that doctors other than medical doctors can offer HIV testing in their practices. I said to myself: “Why not add another service to our existing checklist of lesions or cavities and give patients the opportunity to know their status in a different setting?” I saw this as a unique opportunity for me as a dentist to diagnose HIV in its early stages.

Unfortunately, the virus is still highly prevalent. In New York City alone, there are 94,000 confirmed cases and it seems that the number of infections is not improving in 2009/2010.

Why should dental offices test for infectious diseases such as HIV?

Dr. Catrise Austin, New York City

AIDS or tuberculosis in the first place?

My opinion is that HIV tests should be offered in every dental practice because the oral cavity is one of the...
all over the world interested in offering the test because it is easy for the patients and takes only a little bit of time.

Is the test optional?
The test is completely optional and we offer it to all our patients, from teenagers who are in high school and probably sexually active to those in their 60s and older. We do not discriminate because the virus does not discriminate.

Since we began administering the test in August, we have offered it to about 150 patients of which about 60 percent have taken it. Fortunately, we did not have any positive testing so far.

What happens if a patient tests positive?
We are fully trained and prepared in case a test is positive. If a patient tests positive, we counsel him or her immediately and help him or her call a primary health physician to schedule a confirmatory test.

It is important to note that the test that we offer is a screening test only and not a confirmed test. If a patient does not have a physician, we usually refer him or her to one of the clinics in the New York City area with which we have a partnership.

There are thousands of people in the U.S. and more around the world who are unaware that they are HIV/AIDS infected. Do you think that regular checks in dental practices could help to create more awareness of the disease?

That is something I would like to see happening as more dentists begin administering the test. It is time to recognize that we should be concerned with the patient’s holistic health, not only his or her oral health.

I am the first dentist in New York to offer the test, and I would love to be the trailblazer and help to make the test the standard of care in dental practices around the world.

The greatest joy for me is when a patient says that he or she would have never undergone this test if it were not for me.