Shaping up

Before considering orthodontic treatment, a patient’s oral health must be impeccable, urges Dr Andrew McCance

Amid fears that gum disease could be linked to health problems such as cardiovascular disease, people are becoming more interested in oral hygiene. Even the Sex Pistols’ vocalist John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten) has spent US$22,000 on improving his dental and oral health, having admitted in an interview that he was ‘poisoning himself’ with ‘gum infections’. 1

Experts in a variety of fields including cardiology, endocrinology and periodontology have been considering the evidence of a link between periodontal disease and systemic conditions. The jury is still out, but it is better to be safe than sorry, and patients need to be made aware of the importance of oral health.

No time like now

This is the ideal time for patients to improve their oral health regimen and consider orthodontic treatment – in that order. No orthodontist will look to begin treatment if there is a case of swollen or bleeding gums. In fact, the patient’s oral health needs to be impeccable before the orthodontist will go any further, with a sign-off from the dentist that the patient is dentally fit for the required procedures.

Orthodontic treatment has several benefits, not least of which is to give the patient the added confidence and attitude to life that comes with a nice, straight smile. However, another key benefit is that, in an even smile, there are fewer difficult-to-reach areas where infection can set in. It is easier to maintain the cleanliness and hygiene of an even set of teeth than it is to maintain an uneven set, and with interdental brushes and other products, patients can develop a first-class hygiene strategy.

With a great smile comes the confidence to attend the dentist regularly. Many people are ashamed of the state of their teeth, and predicting a lambasting from their dentist, refrain from meeting appointments, or even making them in the first place. This, of course, compounds the problem. We can only guess at how many patients notice blood when they are cleaning their teeth, but do nothing about it, making the assumption that if there is no pain, there is no disease.

Talk to your patients

So, in order to provide your patients with a first-class service, talk to them about their oral health regimen, and the products they use, if they are interested in orthodontic treatment, make them aware of the oral and dental health benefits. Tell them about the latest orthodontic treatment systems that involve the use of removable, clear medical-grade polymer positioners, and let them weigh up their options. Don’t pressure them into making a decision – orthodontic treatment does not work effectively without the firm foundation of patient commitment.

With leading experts throughout healthcare seriously considering whether periodontal and dental health are connected to systemic issues, and UK patients taking more of an interest in their smiles thanks largely to the media and our celebrity-driven culture, GDPs are wise to start enriching their treatment list to include orthodontics.

1. http://lifeandhealth.guardian.co.uk/health/story/0,,2283477,00.html