Mouthwashes: help or hindrance?

Neel Kohari discusses the contribution of mouthwashes to oral health

T

his may seem like a strange question, be

cause of course, dentistry is nothing but

raises awareness to and im-

proves oral healthcare must be

good, right? I mean, who could argue with the many claims of evi-

dence supporting fluoridated toothpastes in reducing caries rates, or even the efficacy of anti-

plaque agents such as chlorhexi-

dine in reducing plaque levels?

Now the manufacturers of many of these products are very quick to promote their semi-medicin-

al nature, but unlike regulated medicines, very little emphasis is given to the risks.

’Sufficient evidence’

A literature review by McCol-

lough and Farah (Dental Journal of Australia, 2008) concluded that there is ‘sufficient evidence’ that ‘alcohol-containing mouthwash-

es contribute to the increased risk with many of the claims made by the manufacturers and the FDA has warned manufacturers, such as Walgreen Co Johnson & Johnson, and CVS Corp to stop making unproven claims that their mouth rinse products can reduce plaque above the gum line, promote gum health, and prevent gum disease. The compo-

nents of these mouthwashes are effective in preventing gum disease, but according to the FDA no such benefit has been demonstrated.

On a different note, it is worth questioning whether the termin-

ology used by mouthwash brands helps or hinders the population’s ability to maintain their own oral hygiene. Consider for instance the slogan ‘bleeding gums are bad’. At first glance this seems hard to argue against, but if we look at when people actually

trichloasan etc; but how effective are these products when stacked up against thorough cleaning? Are they actually needed or help-

ful in the presence of decent oral cleaning? Furthermore, if it is not as helpful to our patients as the claims suggest, could this hinder some of our patients’ oral hygiene routine by convincing them that they are doing everything they can to look after their teeth and leading them to a cost ineffective dependency?

Child ranges

Many leading manufacturers are introducing children’s ranges of mouthwashes, again with much of the same rhetoric around kill-

ing bacteria and carefully worded implications surrounding pre-

venting oral health problems. Many of the studies used by the mouthwash manufacturers point to improvements when looking at mouthwashes being used as an adjunct to decent oral clean-

ing; but there is very little evi-

dence supporting the use in the presence of poor cleaning or as a substitute for good oral hygiene. Whilst the ‘help’ that they claim to offer to families is heavily ad-

vertised, perhaps mouth washing post brushing (hence rinsing of fluoridated toothpaste) for a high caries risk child may actually be a hindrance.

Whilst organisations such as the FDA have acted to repre-

spond companies for making false claims, this in itself does not prove harm or a causal link to those patients to choose to stay away from gingival brushing and flossing because they mis-

interpret slogans such as ‘bleed-

ing gums are bad’ or ‘cleans the whole mouth’. However, this does lead me back to the original ques-

tion: are mouthwashes actually a help or a hindrance? Of course, in some situations they can be very useful and many dentists often recommend these products with good results, but this is marred by a plethora of quasi-scientific claims which, rather than em-

phasise their limited usefulness, imply to many that they are a ad-

equate replacement to decent oral cleaning.

‘It is worth questioning whether the terminology used by mouthwash brands helps or hinders the population’s ability to maintain their own oral hygiene’

of development of oral cancer’. The authors also state that the risk of acquiring cancer rises al-

most five times for users of alco-

hol-containing mouthwash who neither smoke nor drink (with a higher rate of increase for those who do). Whilst this was disputed by Yinka Ebo of Cancer Research who do (). Whilst this was disputed by Yinka Ebo of Cancer Research...