Supporting our patients’ oral health
Dr Conor Gallagher discusses the importance of oral health

Oral health is important. According to information published by the British Dental Health Foundation (BDHF), people with gum disease are almost twice as likely to have coronary artery disease than people without gum disease. Furthermore, the BDHF also points to several conditions which may be caused or even made worse by poor dental health, including heart disease, strokes, diabetes, respiratory disease and even low-birthweight babies.

As dental professionals, naturally, we all recognise the importance of oral health. Not only does a good standard of oral health impact upon general bodily health, but it also affects the chances of patients maintaining their natural dentition into their later years, and can greatly improve their general quality of life.

It is part of our mission then to extol the many benefits of good oral health on a daily basis, and in so doing, inform and educate our patients on the best ways in which they can ensure their smiles are kept healthy and clean. A vital part of our role then is teaching patients the fundamental habits of good oral hygiene. This includes reminding patients to brush their teeth at least twice a day, and also to change their toothbrush every three months or after illness.

Further to regular brushing habits, patients are also advised to use floss and/or interdental brushes in conjunction with a fluoride mouthwash for the best results. Choice of toothpaste is also a very important consideration, and with so many toothpastes available on the market, patients should consider which will most benefit their own particular situation – be it by investing in a product designed to help relieve sensitivity, or perhaps a product designed with whitening in mind.

But while the modern world has undoubtedly brought about a great many improvements in general standards of oral health, it also offers us a great many challenges. As dentists we constantly battle in the face of a society that bombards us with so many different slogans, adverts and images that the fundamental health messages we give our patients often get overlooked, or in some cases, even ignored.

Educating our patients then, is one of the biggest challenges we face as a profession, and is one we must embrace and take head-on if we are to improve the overall standard of oral health in the UK and Ireland. We need to work to remind patients of the essential truth that if they look after their teeth, they will be more likely to keep their teeth into later life; they will be less likely to need emergency treatment; and they will generally experience a better quality of life as a result.
head-on if we are to dedicate internet forums. Bate and participation on the patients online, promoting de- actively discussing issues with some practices are now even recent boom in social media, advice. Furthermore, with the patients can refer to for tips and practice website as an additional choose to use their prac- messages. Practices may also post posters and leaflets that com- marketing material such as oral health include the use of patients in the importance of tions and very real pressures with real thoughts and emo- on legs”, but are real people, patients aren’t just “mouths powerful reminder to us that own little working “bubbles”, sometimes to our own detri- ment and that of our patients. This is why campaigns such as National Smile Month are so important, and serve as a powerful reminder to us that patients aren’t just “mouths on legs”, but are real people, with real thoughts and emo- and very real pressures upon their lives.

Other ways educating our patients in the importance of oral health include the use of marketing material such as posters and leaflets that com- municate good oral hygiene habits. Practices may also choose to use their prac- tice website as an additional source of information that pa- tients can refer to for tips and advice. Furthermore, with the recent boom in social media, some practices are now even actively discussing issues with patients online, promoting de-bate and participation on the likes of Facebook, Twitter and dedicated internet forums.

Another excellent innova- tion is dfyt.com (don’t forget your toothbrush! dfyt.com is a subscription-based delivery service for toothbrushes and other oral hygiene products that saves patients money, while also ensuring they re- member to change their tooth- brush every three months.

The system is simple. Each practice that registers will receive posters and leaflets marked with a practice-spe- cific code. Every patient that subscribes using the code will receive an extra five per cent discount on their order, while the practice will receive 10 per cent of the order value as revenue.

The advantage of schemes such as dfyt.com is that they work to actively engage pa- tients in their own oral health – they encourage patients to take a deeper interest in oral hygiene. In the long term, this can only benefit the pro- fession. From the dental per- spective if you have a patient who takes responsibility for their teeth then they will start to take more of an interest in their own mouths. These pa- tients may then go on to get other treatments they might not otherwise have considered.

From a wider viewpoint, patients who are actively en- gaging with their own oral health are more likely to re- search treatments and so as a result, treatment acceptance is likely to be far higher, and patients may consider treatment- s that they might other- wise never have considered.

With so many advances in technology over recent years, as a profession we now have more tools than ever to help us engage with our patients. Be it through social media, forums, websites, or even schemes such as dfyt.com, there is a whole world of opportunity out there to support us in our daily efforts.

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**About the author**

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Dr Anoop Malhi
Dr Andy Denny

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