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 premature and 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 exalt 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.

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.
The first way in which we can embrace this challenge is to ensure we all make strides to actually engage with our patients. This doesn’t just mean reminding patients to brush their teeth – this means actually talking to patients, discussing the advantages of good oral hygiene habits, and the benefits they will experience in their day to day lives. As a profession we can very often get too caught up in our own little working “bubbles”, sometimes to our own detriment 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 emotions 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 communicate good oral hygiene messages. Practices may also choose to use their practice website as an additional source of information that patients 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 debate and participation on the likes of Facebook, Twitter and dedicated internet forums.

Another excellent innovation 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 remember to change their toothbrush every three months.

The system is simple. Each practice that registers will receive posters and leaflets marked with a practice-specific 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 patients 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 profession. From the dental perspective 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 patients may then go on to get other treatments they might not otherwise have considered.

From a wider viewpoint, patients who are actively engaging 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 treatments that they might otherwise 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.