Save a tooth - treat the root

Dental Tribune looks at the launch of the Saving Teeth campaign in the UK

Having a tooth drilled can be the most nerve wracking idea for patients, and can ultimately put them off having any kind of restorative tooth treatment. The thing is, according to experts, root canal treatment should in fact be the first choice where possible for anyone with an infected tooth; however, every year thousands of teeth are still being pulled out as a result of infection.

Aesthetically, you would think that patients would rather save their tooth instead of living with a gap or forking out for costly dental implants, but this is simply not the case. Referring to the latest figures from the NHS, more than two million teeth were extracted last year, whilst only half a million root canal treatments were carried out. These figures suggest that patients are not receiving all the information.

Anxieties

The recent Adult Dental Health Survey showed that 50 per cent of adults are extremely anxious about having a tooth drilled, and when someone feels anxious it’s not easy to make decisions. So how many of these patients made their choice with all the information in mind? Were they fully aware that root canal treatment is the exact procedure that can save their teeth.

The campaign's key messages include:

• Saving a tooth is, where possible, better for the health of your mouth
• A well root-treated tooth covered with a crown can survive for many years if not for the rest of your life
• If a tooth becomes infected and left untreated bone loss can occur

There is a similar campaign in America, fronted by the American Association of Endodontists (AAE). The aim is to let patients know that if they are faced with tooth loss they can consider Endodontics and they achieve this with photo competitions, articles in newspapers and posters all over dental practices. Compared to the US, there are more than 15 million root canals performed annually in the USA.

In support of their Root Canal Awareness Week, the AAE carried out a survey which revealed that 70 per cent of Americans feared losing a natural tooth although the same percentage feared root canal treatment. What they didn’t realise was that root canal treatment is the exact procedure that can save their teeth.

Economic Endodontics

The UK’s Saving Teeth Campaign is fronted by endodontist Julian Webber, a world leader in the field of endodontics and his colleague, Trevor Lamb. Supporters include recognised authorities in areas such as restorative dentistry, oral surgery, and the psychology of dentistry along with patients and high profile supporters Michael Winner and Peter Snow.

Talking about the campaign Julian Webber said: “Endodontics works when done properly and it saves teeth. It’s an economical way to preserve a tooth in function and avoid tooth loss.

“Last year’s figures from the Information Centre showed that four times as many teeth were taken out as there were root treatments and I believe there is scope for improving that ratio. If there’s a chance of saving a patient’s tooth we as a profession should always do so. Sometimes patients want in infected tooth taken out but we need to make sure they understand all the implications of their decision and know what their choices are.

The literature clearly shows that teeth treated with root canal treatment with adequate coronal restoration are just as likely to survive as implant retained restorations.”

Looking ahead to the future, the campaign ultimately wants to see figures showing that the number of extractions in the UK has gone down and to see the NHS recognising and remunerating the additional skills and costly equipment used by specialists and dentists with additional training.

Most importantly, Saving Teeth wants to ensure that patients are being encouraged to seek endodontics, either from their dentist or from a specialist.

As Dr Webber explained, in the end the campaign is about getting dentists to appreciate that their patients’ interests are really paramount importance; “Where possible if dentists think that they can’t do a difficult case then referring to a specialist should be the preferred option.”

“At the end of the day, endodontics is usually the best option for patients and should always be their first choice.”