Getting one’s patients to engage in preventative oral health behaviours can be difficult at times. Helping them to understand the importance of such care for long-term health is key to achieving this. With this in mind, prevention magazine spoke with Clare Ison, a nurse and oral health educator at Beaufort Dental Health Centre in Burton-on-Trent in the UK, about what her roles entail and how she motivates and educates her patients to take ownership of their oral health.

Mrs Ison, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background?

Clare Ison: I initially started my career in dentistry in 1988 before becoming a qualified dental nurse in 1994—back then, one didn’t have to become a qualified nurse immediately, unlike now. At a point, I had a bit of a career break, but I’ve come back to work in practice management. Though I also used my break to gain qualifications in business management, I gained my post qualification as an oral health educator as well.

What does being an oral health educator involve? How do you become one?

It just means educating one’s patients about prevention—preventing any dental disease, whether it is periodontal disease or dental caries. Oral cancer is also on the increase, so discussing that topic is important as well. Dentists or hygienists refer patients to our clinic, and once the patients are with us, we look at what the aims of the appointment are. Though this differs for patients, we always want them to go away from our clinic with the motivation to take charge of their own oral health.

With respect to becoming an oral health educator, we put our nurses through a nine-month-long online course that is run by the British Dental Association. Though the online aspect of it makes it somewhat easier to complete, the content is quite in depth: there are case studies one has to go through, the way one conducts lessons is analysed, and there’s an exam at the end of it. It’s a great programme that gives nurses a chance to get additional skills and new responsibilities, and more nurses should be encouraged by their practices to do this sort of stuff.

What do you specifically aim to educate your patients about?

We really want to emphasise the importance of keeping one’s mouth healthy. One doesn’t want them to see the hygienist and think that that’s enough and not take any action until they come back for another check-up six
months later. They need to know how to practise good oral hygiene at home, what the risk factors for certain oral diseases are, and indeed, what even causes them. We go right back to basics, what toothbrush and toothpaste they use. It’s not judgemental, however; this is aimed at providing them with a solid base of knowledge upon which they can build.

We’re all about prevention. To be honest, why would one keep treating a patient who has dental disease without informing him or her about what exactly was causing that disease? If he or she has tooth decay, for example, one can treat it by providing fillings, but one also needs to explain what exactly is causing the decay so that the patient can be aware of it and prevent it.

What type of patients do you have at your practice?
We welcome all ages and all patients, but we do like to focus on children, as we can get them started at an early age with a good education on oral health. At the end of the day, they’re most likely to be shown how to clean their teeth by their parents, and if there’s something wrong with how they’ve been taught, we need to break the cycle and improve the oral health of not just the children but also hopefully the whole family.

How can you motivate patients to adopt good oral hygiene practices?
We sometimes like to focus on the risk factors and the issues that can potentially arise, such as tooth and bone loss. However, it’s most important to show patients support and guidance and provide them with a good oral health education. If these are all right, the patients will usually listen. Though this is sometimes a step-by-step process for certain patients and can require multiple sessions, it is ultimately worthwhile.

How many patients practise or understand the benefits of something like interdental cleaning?
Well, interdental cleaning is something that a lot of patients don’t know about, because they often think that a toothbrush cleans all of the tooth surfaces, and so it’s quite difficult to implement in a daily oral routine. However, if one demonstrates it to them not just on a model but in their own mouths as well, one will often be able to physically show them the removed plaque on the interdental brush, the evidence of what is in the interdental space, and this can motivate them to adopt it in their day-to-day routine.

What is the current situation regarding oral health-care in the UK?
Overall, I would say it is quite good, yet there are still some areas that can be addressed. Interdental cleaning, as I mentioned, is not really something that is that popular in the UK yet, and there’s also a lot of patients who think that brushing their teeth only once a day, and not twice, is acceptable. Though they might be hesitant at first, once we’re able to educate patients and show them how removing plaque twice a day can improve their oral health dramatically, we can really get them to change their oral hygiene habits for the better.

Thank you very much for the interview.