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## Obesity is everyone's problem

All healthcare providers should be addressing the issue. *by Susan Maples*

Q: Do you think dentists and dental hygienists should be addressing obesity prevention and intervention in patients?

A: Calling ALL health care professionals: My opinion is a resounding YES! Can we as a total health care team accept the facts? Obesity is not only crippling our young people but our entire health care system, in terms of medical expenditures for related illnesses. Hello everyone! Let's all roll up our sleeves and do our part.

Between 1971 and 2009 the prevalence of obese children quadrupled-- 32 % of our country's youth are obese (BMI over 30). We, as dental health professionals, have quietly watched it happen. We are arguably the only health care team that "sees" a child (at least 83% of US children) every six months beginning at about age three. What a wonderful opportunity to build an ongoing relationship that can make a significant difference in the lives of our patients.

How does our profession feel about this challenge? Well, it's a hot topic. A most recent research article (*cover story of the November 2010 Journal of the American Dental Association*) tallied the attitudes of dentists toward addressing obesity intervention in patients. The views are divided. Half (50.3%) of our profession wants to be involved, and wants to develop behaviors, skills and models to do so. Currently fewer than 5 % offer any diagnosis, discussion or solution-based services around obesity.

In the JADA article, the top three fears dentists and hygienists face in talking to patients about obesity are fear of offending patients (54%), appearing judgmental (52%) and lack of adequate training (46%).

So, there is obviously a need for continuing education to help all health care professionals increase their comfort in addressing obesity with sensitivity and non-judgment. Also, we want more competency— access to appropriate models, within the scope of our practice, that are clear and effective for patients.

We can begin today by actively observing developmental changes in children and starting the conversation. Stay curious and let the child and/or parents report their story. Let *them* tell *you* about the observable changes. Find out what they already know before you offer any help. And, if you or your health care team is not yet comfortable offering services, reach out. Build community referral sources. Our community is rich in the areas of nutrition, fitness, and psychological counseling.

Every significant change begins with a small step. Be part of the change you want to see in the health of our nation.