



April 2012

# The future of dentistry

Look for stronger diagnostic skills from your dentist. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: What do you see as the future trend in the profession of dentistry?

A: We have ridden the “cosmetic dentistry” wave for several years now and while the smile makeover advances slow up, the links between oral and systemic diseases are swelling at a furious pace. More and more we recognize the need for dentists to become primary diagnosticians of systemic disease, and to create synergistic networks with a multitude of other health professionals. With the myriad of the lifestyle diseases we encounter on a day to day basis, we can’t get very far treating any single oral malady without bumping into another practitioner’s arena.

Take for example my patient who was recently diagnosed with type II diabetes—a serious lifestyle illness related directly to his careless diet and weight gain. Because diabetes is a vascular illness it has exacerbated his periodontal (gum and bone) disease. Inflammation from that puts him at risk for heart disease, liver disease, Alzheimer’s disease and impotence. And...uh oh! His high calorie, sugary diet also caused a surge in dental decay. Weight gain, decreased energy and worry, have triggered some depression and his prescription meds for diabetes and depression have resulted in a severely dry mouth. How does he deal with a dry mouth? He sips diet pop and sucks on sugar-free lemon candy. The acidity of these remedies, along with reduced nourishment from saliva, is literally melting his enamel. Keep in mind that if smoking or hypertension were part of the mix, I’d have to re-write this entire paragraph.

Now is the time for all good docs to come to the scene of the crime! It is up to us, as partners in health care, to sharpen our collective diagnostic skills and make appropriate referrals. Physicians and dentists have much to learn from one another about how to quickly recognize signs of oral and systemic diseases and help the patient understand these connections. For one person the reality of having diabetes or depression might serve to motivate healthier behaviors and for another, the experience of losing or destroying teeth may be the catalyst for change.

Research suggests that patients are ready for their dentists to take a more significant role in their primary health, reporting longer and more trusting relationships with their dentist than any other health care provider.

I envision this exciting new role sparking a very positive trend in dental practice—one that fosters *communication* and *community* around a lifetime of health for our collective patients.