

## WHO IS TAKING CARE OF YOUR PARENTS' TEETH? Taking Dentistry into Nursing Home Setting

We make sure that our children and ourselves brush teeth everyday and get dental check up twice a year. What about our geriatric parents living in nursing homes? Senior citizen in nursing home setting has traditionally been an underserved segment of our population in terms of oral health care. We would like to use this opportunity to highlight some of the challenges that our seniors are facing and some possible solutions.

Our elderly parents face unique challenges in maintaining proper oral hygiene due to physical and/or mental disabilities that are often come with old age. Reduced dexterity and hand-eye coordination translate directly to lower state of oral health. On top of these physical obstacles, human emotions (such as pride, embarrassment, guilt) make it so much more difficult for our elderly parents to accept help in brushing teeth. The same set of emotion also prevents us, the caregivers, to readily offer help in these mundane tasks and doing them with extreme care. For those senior citizens who live with their immediate families, they are more likely to enjoy a higher level of care from their love ones. It is a different story for the ones who live in institutional setting.

Most of the nursing home population are frail, medically compromised who would require more care than their family can give. Nursing home staffs have the underappreciated job of taking care of a large number of residents with tight budget and resource constraints. Under these circumstances, lower priority care items might be ignored. Oral health care often falls into this category. Is it really a lower priority item?

Overall health starts at the mouth. Oral health and medical health are very much interrelated. Here are some examples: Proper digestion of food is not possible without good teeth. Gum disease is an infection that can lower the immune system's ability to fight other sickness. Bacteria in gum infection has been linked to heart disease. Illness in other parts of the body may show signs in oral cavity. Imbalance of the bite (such as broken denture) may cause headache, neck pain, dizziness, hormonal imbalance, ear ringing. ( see the article "TMD the Great Imposter") This list goes on and on; however, there is one single most important factor in deciding how important is oral health. That factor is **QUALITY OF LIFE**. Of course it is important for our body to function properly, what about our mental state? Would we be happier eating a juicy steak or drinking Ensure milkshake through a straw? Depression is common among the geriatric population. Imagine how difficult it is for our elderly parents to slowly lose their

independence. Under these circumstances, the simple pleasure of eating and tasting food has a great impact in lifting their spirit.

## **WHAT CAN WE DO?**

### **Education**

Our Team All About Smiles have conducted many on site training sessions for nursing home staff. Our goals are to share with the staff techniques in assisting residents with oral hygiene procedures and in identifying signs of oral pathology and infections. We have been received with great enthusiasm from the staff. It has been very gratifying to see these health professionals willing to learn so they can elevate the level of care.

### **Bring Dental Office into Nursing Homes**

Transportation is a common problem for home residents to receive dental care. With the advent of portable dental equipments, it is possible to perform some of the dental procedures in the nursing home. Procedures such as denture fabrication and repair, teeth cleaning are within possibility. A dentist can perform regular check up onsite and can contribute in the development of the comprehensive care plan of each of the individual resident.

### **Presenting: ALL ABOUT SMILES MOBILE**

Currently our office is gearing up to bring this concept to practice. At the request of the patients or their legal guardians, we would visit them at the facility as their private health care provider. In the first phase of this program, we would provide onsite semi annual check up (including x-ray) and limited cleaning. Most of the denture related procedures would be done onsite as well. For the patients who require the use of our dental office, we would schedule them to complete all necessary procedures in one visit. This would reduce the headache of transportation. Our boutique office in North Wilmington is well suited for this purpose. In the near future, we would bring a mobile dental facility to the nursing home.

As the population in the United States ages, the number of nursing home residents can only increase. Care for our elderly citizens will continue to be a hot debate topic. Oral health care issue really should be raised in this discussion as a distinct topic, not as a secondary issue after medical care. After all, we are all going to get old.

### **Note:**

*Caring for the elders are one of our team All About Smiles' passion. If you would like us to speak with your group about geriatric care or any other dental related subjects, we would very happy to do so.*