

# The dentist and oral health

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WFP van Heerden



The World Health Organisation in its publication on Oral Health for the 21st Century stated: "No longer will it be sufficient for a dentist to sit in an operatory and concentrate on individual teeth. Instead, the new oral health practitioner must view himself (sic), and be viewed by others, as someone who cares for the community's health... The changing disease patterns, the advanced diagnostic and treatment methodologies and the broadening of responsibilities illustrate the need for a new type of oral health professional. Someone with special education and skills in the care of the oral and maxillofacial complex."<sup>1</sup>

Dentists are the primary custodians of the oral health of their patients and the community they serve. If we all agree with this statement, the next logical step is to agree on what oral health entails. It is a misconception that it should only refer to the absence of dental caries and periodontal disease. The oral cavity not only consists of teeth and gingivae, but includes the oral mucosa, tongue, salivary glands, lips, masticatory muscles, jawbones and other soft tissue elements. Oral health in my opinion implies being free of diseases and conditions in all of these tissues.

The oral cavity is the "domain" of the general dental practitioner. Dentists

**WFP van Heerden:** Head: Department of Oral Pathology and Oral Biology, School of Dentistry, University of Pretoria.

should be able to manage the oral health of persons with diabetes, cardiovascular problems, HIV/AIDS, cancer as well as other systemic disorders. Perhaps if we can achieve this, we will be justified in referring to ourselves as Oral physicians. It will hopefully not be long before this approach is reflected in guidelines and policy documents affecting our profession.

The South African Dental Association must be congratulated on making oral cancer the health theme for 2011-12. Numerous press releases and publications dealing with a variety of topics related to oral cancer as part of this Awareness Campaign have reached thousands of people. This has been highly successful and has enabled the dental practitioner to continue with this drive. Prof Andre van Zyl should be congratulated on his effort in this regard.

Cancer of the upper aerodigestive tract is a problem in many developing countries, including South Africa. The average survival rate has not changed in the last few decades in these countries.<sup>2</sup> It is also well documented that early diagnosis is essential if we wish to improve the overall outcome.<sup>3</sup> This Special Edition is dedicated to oral cancer and includes a wide range of related topics which will hopefully keep dental practitioners informed and up-to-date with recent trends and developments. The desired outcome is provision of improved, comprehensive oral health care for the dental patient.

A special word of thanks goes to Ms Maretha Smit and Prof Bill Evans for their continuous support to ensure that we could place all the manuscripts in this special edition. I must also thank all the contributing authors who prepared and submitted manuscripts on relatively short notice on each of the specific topics. Finally, I would like to leave all our readers with the words of Prof David Krutchkoff, Emeritus Professor from the University of Connecticut: "To succeed as true health care professionals, we must move away from the time-honoured image of dentistry as a skilled technical or mechanically oriented practice to that of a specialised, medically based clinician (physician) who approaches oral disease biologically rather than strictly as caretakers of teeth in need of maintenance or repair."<sup>4</sup>

## References

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## Special Edition: Oral Cancer

*This November 2012 issue of the Journal, Vol 67 no 10, recognises the Association Theme of the Year, which is Oral Cancer. The Guest Editor, Professor Willie van Heerden, kindly and ably assisted by Professor Andre van Zyl, has assembled a remarkable collection of erudite and informative papers which treat this enormously important aspect of the responsibilities of the oral health care team. Early identification of the warning signs of oral cancer is a crucial service for our patients, and in this issue details and knowledge will be found which will equip us to meet that responsibility with confidence and appropriate expertise. To both Willie and Andre and to all the contributing authors' a resounding expression of appreciation and congratulation. This issue will serve as a crucial source of reference alongside every dental chair. A special edition indeed! The Editor*

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