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SPECIAL FEATURE: Oral health

Life is like a box of chocolates: meeting the periodontal challenge

W hen considering periodontal disease, it is essential to realise the epidemiological and pathological significance of this condition. The WHO oral health survey systems of 1997 and 2002 indicate that the number of people between the ages of 35 to 44 years in the world who have lost their natural teeth is about 8.4% of the population. In the USA, of those aged 35-44 years, 25% are edentulous. This trend continues into older age groups, with estimates suggesting that by the age of 65 years and over who are edentulous has increased to 27%.

In the UK, the Department of Health (2008) report indicates that of the population of England and Wales, 2.3 million adults are edentulous, of whom 1.6 million have lost all their teeth. This equates to 8% of the population of England and Wales. The data further show that the number of people aged 65 years and over who are edentulous has increased to 27%.

The importance of periodontal disease lies in its potential to cause damage to the supporting structures of the teeth. This can lead to tooth mobility and eventual tooth loss. The consequences of tooth loss can be profound, affecting not only the individual’s oral health but also their overall quality of life. Tooth loss can lead to difficulties in eating, speaking, and maintaining social interactions. Additionally, the loss of teeth can lead to changes in the jawbone structure, which can result in changes in facial appearance and speech.

Gingivitis and periodontitis

Gingivitis is the inflammation of the gums, often associated with the presence of plaque and calculus on the tooth surface. It is a reversible condition that can be managed by good oral hygiene practices. However, if left untreated, gingivitis can progress to periodontitis, which is a chronic inflammatory condition that can lead to bone loss around the teeth.

The linear model where a patient loses a tooth due to periodontitis is relatively predictable. The discontinuous model where the disease process has already begun, unfortunately, lead to tooth loss. Both models are important to understand, as patients with chronic periodontitis are a constant risk for tooth loss.

Data from Claffey et al (1990) indicates that the number of people aged 65 years and over who are edentulous has increased to 27%.

Types of treatment

Current, periodontitis therapy is the most effective way to treat and prevent both conditions. Treatment can range from mechanical, and where appropriate, chemical intervention. On a day-to-day basis, the emphasis is on the patient to adopt good plaque control and oral hygiene.

The discontinuous model where the disease process has already begun, unfortunately, lead to tooth loss. Both models are important to understand, as patients with chronic periodontitis are a constant risk for tooth loss.

Unfortunately, the pathogenesis of periodontal disease is complex, and there are tools to assist clinicians to predict those individuals who are likely to have periodontitis. There is currently no crystal ball that is 100% accurate. As a consequence, patients with periodontal disease are often a box of chocolates.

Reader enquiry: 120

Professor Anthony Roberts is professor of Periodontology at University College Cork in Ireland. Since qualifying as a dentist in 1984, Prof Roberts has worked in general practice as well as hospital and university settings.

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