

# The Role of General Dental Practitioner in Oral Health

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## SUMMARY

Although it is widely acclaimed in the recent past that the Nigerian has healthy set of teeth and no oral health problems. Our findings show that over 2.3 million Nigerians between the ages of 3 and 70 years attend dental clinics yearly for treatment. In spite of this, provision of oral health care and services at the local outage is highly deficient.

Just as the eyes may be the window to the soul, the mouth is a window to the body's health. The state of oral health can offer lots of clues about the overall health as these are more closely connected than one might realize. Oral Health is connected to many health conditions beyond the mouth, and indeed, sometimes the first sign of a disease may show up in the mouth. The mouth is normally teeming with bacteria, and some researchers believe that these bacteria and inflammation from the mouth are linked to other health problems including heart disease. Other diseases that affect the oral cavity include, but not limited to caries, infections of the gum and jaws, malformations, benign and malignant tumours, as well as diabetes.

The general dental practitioner therefore has very important duties. These include early recognition and diagnosis of oral health problems, oral health promotion, education and provision of care and services. Dental professionals should make dental patients aware that oral health care can't wait. They should market their practice to increase business and oral health care awareness.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dentistry, sometimes referred to as Dental Surgery may be defined as that branch of Surgical Practice which deals with the diagnosis, surgical and adjunctive treatment of the diseases, injuries and malformations of the human teeth and other associated structures. Dentistry, as a profession, comprises nothing less than fourteen specialities.

The progress achieved in oral Diagnosis and oral Medicine as integral parts of dentistry has greatly improved services in

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Oral health. This is further enhanced by the innovations in prosthetics, orthodontics and laboratory technology. On the other hand, the parallel developments in general medicine, radiology, anaesthesia and chemotherapy all facilitated the growth of oral and maxillofacial surgery within dentistry.

Health economics studies have differentiated oral health care from general medical care based on uncertainty and asymmetric information<sup>1</sup>. Oral health care is not considered an emergency care except in cases of accidents or toothache. Therefore, unlike general medical treatment, individuals take their time to decide when they would make a dental visit, and sometimes even decide on what dental treatment they should be given. Although, it is widely but erroneously acclaimed in the recent past that the Nigerian has healthy set of teeth and no oral health problems, our findings show that over 2-3 million Nigerians between the ages of 3 and 70 years attend dental clinics. There are numerous reports in the status of oral health in this country dating back over four or five decades<sup>2-10</sup>. In spite of this, provision of oral health care and services at the local outage is highly deficient.

It must be mentioned that the wider definition of oral health includes not only diseases of the teeth but also, diseases of the gingival, jaw bones, oral mucosa, tongue and lips, and the salivary glands. The incidences of tumorous conditions of the oral cavity have also been studied. Metastatic diseases may also affect the oral cavity, so also some oral manifestations of systemic diseases<sup>10-19</sup>.

## Why Oral Health Matters

Just as the eyes may be the window to the soul, the mouth is a window to the body's health. The state of oral health can offer lots of clues about the overall health conditions beyond the mouth, and indeed, sometimes the first signs of a disease may be present. Numerous recent scientific studies indicate associations between oral health and a variety of general health conditions, including diabetes and heart disease<sup>16,20-21</sup>. *Streptococcus mutans* is known to be associated with bacteremia and infective endocarditis, and recent evidence has indicated an association of periodontitis with cardiovascular diseases.

Too many people mistakenly believe that they need to see a dentist only when they are in pain. But this is the wrong picture. In response to this lack of knowledge, and because poor oral health can lead to numerous health hazards, the World Health Organization (WHO) has integrated oral health into its chronic disease prevention efforts.

### The Dental Practitioner's Role

The General Dental Practitioner has an important role to play. In this sub-region, various reports indicate that the oral health knowledge of both Nigerian children and mothers is poor<sup>6-9</sup>. And in the past, oral health had been discussed out of context of general health. This is misleading as we have seen that the bacteria and inflammation from the mouth are linked to other health problems including heart disease. Other diseases that affect the oral cavity include malformations and tumour of the jaws, diabetes and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

The general dental practitioner therefore has very important duties. These include early recognition and diagnosis of oral health problems, oral health promotion, education and provision of care and services. Dental professionals should make dental patients aware that oral health care can't wait. They should market their practice to increase business and oral health care awareness. The general dental practitioner may be the first health care provider to diagnose an oral lesion. Therefore dentists must be more prevention-oriented rather than a curative approach.

Specifically, their role include, but not limited to, diagnosing oral diseases, promoting oral health and disease prevention, creating treatment plans to maintain or restore oral health of their patients, interpreting radiographs and diagnostic tests, ensuring the safe administration of anaesthetics, monitoring the growth and development of the teeth and jaws, performing surgical procedures on the teeth, bone and soft tissue of the oral cavity and managing oral trauma as well as other emergency situations. In this definition, we immediately see that dentists' areas of care include not only their patients' teeth and gums, but also the muscles of the head, neck and jaws, the tongue, salivary glands, the nervous systems of the head and neck, and other areas. These can show lumps, swellings, dislocation and ulcerations. And when appropriate, they perform procedures such as biopsies, diagnostic test for chronic infectious diseases, salivary gland function, and screening tests for oral cancer and AIDS.

In addition, dentists can spot early warning signs in the mouth that may indicate diseases elsewhere in the body, and when appropriate refer patients to other specialists and physicians. If the general dental practitioners are to carry out this assignment efficiently, the structure of the newly introduced National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) in Nigeria, which made physicians the primary provider for dental problems, must be reversed. In this way the general dental practitioners will be able to reach large numbers of families, especially mothers, in order to improve the oral health of the population. Such preventive services will not only reduce caries incidence, but will also provide favourable ratings for oral health.

### Education and Clinical Training

Oral health education is an effective means of teaching individuals and communities about how to prevent the occurrence of dental problems<sup>23,24</sup>. For general dental practitioners to function well, they must possess adequate and accurate knowledge of oral health and preventive measures.

For instance, many general dental practitioners extract a loose tooth without careful examination of the cause of the tooth mobility, whether it is due to periodontitis, general medical condition such as diabetes, Le Fevre Syndrome, or malignancy. The most important factor for preserving oral health is a well-trained general dentist. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that dental surgeons participate actively in global and national oral health prevention and control programmes. By their training, dentists acquire the expertise to examine and diagnose pathological conditions of the teeth and associated structures in the oral cavity. In order to appreciate the role of the dentists and also their concern, one must look into the various systemic diseases that show early signs in the oral cavity. Here also, the early diagnosis of oral manifestations of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) may precede the general clinical signs of the disease in Human Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (HIV) - infected persons. The general dental practitioner who sees oral candidiasis, acute necrotizing ulcerative gingivitis and cancrum oris-like lesions in an age group where they do not normally occur may question whether these are not signs of AIDS or HIV-positivity.

The density of Nigerian dentists is slowly increasing in recent years, but dental contact frequency per capita has remained low. A better understanding of the intensive academic and clinical education that dentists undergo, their role in delivering oral health care, and most importantly, the degree to which oral disease is almost entirely preventable, should stimulate the policy makers to ensure that more Nigerians enjoy lifelong benefits of good oral health through education.

### Improving the Nation's Oral Health

Despite all we know about the importance of oral health to overall health, to people's self-esteem and to their employability, the State and Federal policies continually sell oral health care short. In 1981, the World Health Organization (WHO) and Federation Dentaire Internationale (FDI) proposed the global goals of oral health for 2000<sup>25-26</sup>. The WHO, among other things, made concrete recommendations for Oral Health. Again the new global goals for oral health presented by the FDI, WHO and the International Association for Dental Research (IADR) in 2003 augmented a systemic review of oral health systems, which gained importance in terms of clinical applications and cost effectiveness. Since then, policy makers and dental professionals worldwide have acted consciously according to those indicators. However, the situation in Nigeria is different. In order to improve the nation's oral health, one must concede that social class should not be important in determining access to health care services as this would adversely impact on the decision to visit the general dentist.

In conclusion, the following recommendations could be made.

- Professional preventive oral health care could be made free.
- Flouride application programmes as a part of public health care should be provided.
- The general dentist should shift from a treatment-oriented model to a prevention-oriented model under the cost-

- concentrated policy.
- Pressure should be put on policies to shift towards remodeling statutory dental health insurance schemes towards a cost-effective model. Therefore, the scheme should strategically allocate dental expenditure between public and private sectors.
- General dental practitioners all over the country must prepare themselves to deliver oral health care to all patients of all ages, promote oral health across the population including children, adolescents and older people in both low and socially disadvantaged groups.
- Research in oral health should not be a left out.
- It is our recommendation that dental visits to the general dental practitioner begin not later than a child's first birthday to establish a "dental home". Dentists can provide guidance to children and parents, and diagnose and treat dental diseases in its earliest stages. This will help both children and adults to maintain optimal oral health throughout their lifetimes.

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