

Renewing the Focus on Prevention

How to successfully practice
preventive dentistry



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Renewing
the Focus on
Prevention

By Erik J. Martin

General dentists stand as the first line of defense against emerging health problems — not just maladies affecting the mouth. And that's why a reassessment of the general dentist's role and responsibilities is called for. Stressing and delivering preventive dentistry is not only a moral imperative for dentists — it can also reap dividends that financially reward your practice.



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Fillings, scaling and root planing, veneers, root canals, teeth whitening and extractions certainly account for a sizable chunk of general dentists' revenues. Yet an estimated two-thirds of all dental procedures are either preventive or diagnostic.¹

General dentists stand as the first line of defense against emerging health problems — not just maladies affecting the mouth. So, it makes sense that deterring disease and halting oral health hazards are given a greater priority in dental practices.

Many in the profession, however, believe that dentists don't put enough emphasis on providing preventive care and educating patients about its importance. There's a rising clamor that general dentists put too much focus on restorative and cosmetic treatments and center their services primarily on what insurance companies will reimburse for.

And that's why a reassessment of the general dentist's role and responsibilities is called for, say the experts quoted in this article. Because delivering preventive dentistry is not only a moral imperative for dentists — it can also reap dividends that financially reward your practice.

A Deep Dive into the Data

The good news is that, thanks to reinforcement of twice-daily brushing, flossing and oral home care, greater emphasis on healthier diets and encouragement of regular dental visits, rates of caries, enamel loss, gingivitis and periodontitis have declined over the years.² In turn, patients have reduced their risk of developing associated diseases such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, osteoporosis and respiratory disease, according to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

Consider that baby boomers represent the first generation in which the majority will preserve their natural teeth over their lifetime, thanks to water fluoridation and fluoride toothpastes.³

However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that nine in 10 Americans over the age of 20 have had cavities at some point in their lives, and 27 percent of adults older than 20 have untreated caries. Additionally, nearly a quarter of all children younger than age 5 suffer from cavities, almost five in 10 adults older than 30 have gum disease, and dental-related visits to the emergency room were as high as 2.1 million in 2010, according to the American Dental Association's (ADA) Action for Dental Health: Bringing Disease Prevention into Communities report. These statistics underscore the need for a renewed focus on preventive dentistry.

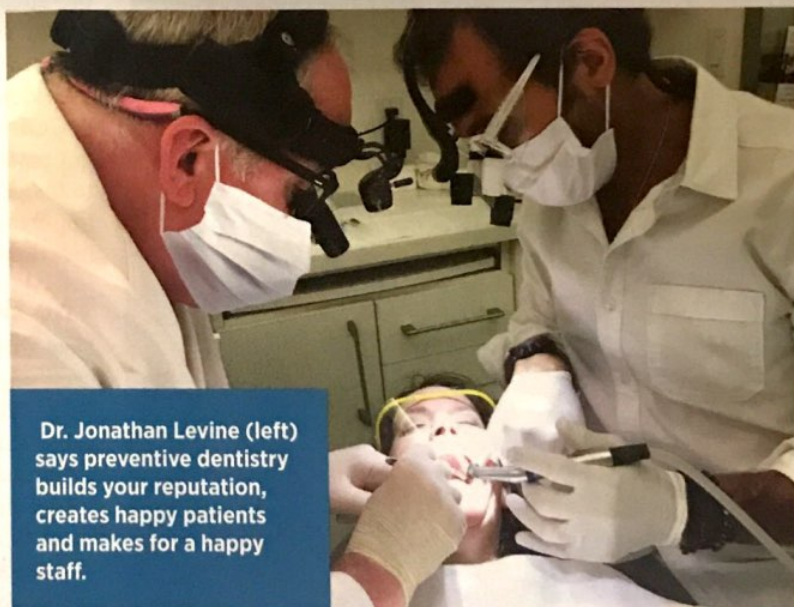
Why Prevention Matters

While caries and periodontal disease continue to be major impediments to oral health, these and other issues can be avoided by even the most basic preventive care, says Gary Glassman, DDS, FRCD(C), a Toronto-based dentist and member of the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Toronto.

"The fundamentals of good preventive care remain brushing and flossing your teeth twice a day, as well as rinsing your mouth or brushing your teeth after every meal," he said. "It also includes regular dental checkups to spot the warning signs of dental disease, as well as treatments such as dental sealants and fluoride varnish meant to strengthen and protect healthy teeth."

Corbin Brady, DDS, of Des Moines, Iowa, agrees.

"Preventive care in dentistry provides a better long-term result for patients. If patients and their dentists work



Dr. Jonathan Levine (left) says preventive dentistry builds your reputation, creates happy patients and makes for a happy staff.

together from a preventive standpoint, they can prevent decay and reduce the risk of removing enamel or injuring the tooth."

The problem, says Atlanta dentist Wayne Kerr, DDS, MAGD, is that while dentistry is prevention-oriented, it's not valued or understood by a large portion of the population.

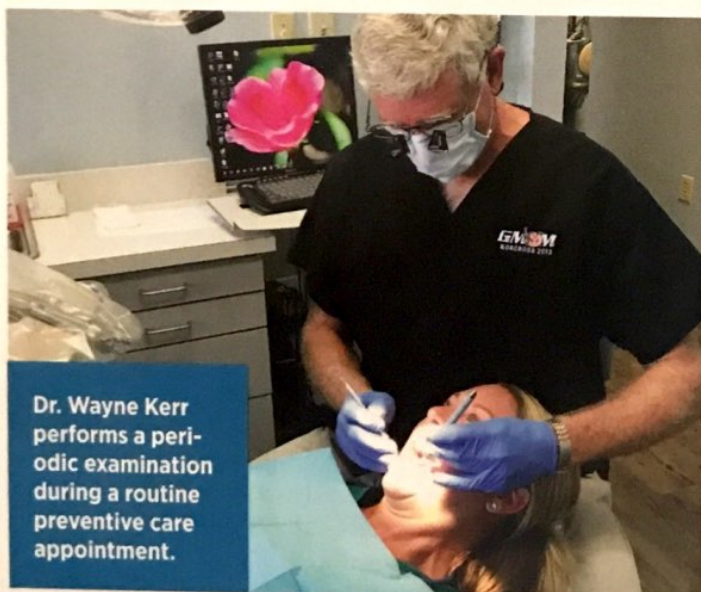
"Consider how some parents still put their babies to bed with bottles filled with sugar-rich juices or milk, leading to devastating baby-bottle caries," he notes. "[Why] can't we get such an important basic educational message through to the consumer in today's world?"

This is where general dentists can make a difference, serving as teachers as well as practitioners, says Mark Burhenne, DDS, an AGD member in Sunnyvale, Calif.

"We need to earn the respect of our patients, and that involves doing more teaching about preventive care," he says.

Burhenne believes that general dentists' commitment to prevention today is lagging.

"We've come up with many great dental solutions such as implants, veneers and Invisalign, but prevention has taken a backseat to these wonderful techniques. We've also adopted a more reactive role to our patients, who are increasingly getting answers and information on the web. I think [some of us have] lost our mojo because we don't feel in control of the education anymore."



Dr. Wayne Kerr performs a periodic examination during a routine preventive care appointment.

Neil Sung, DMD, of Nampa, Idaho, echoes those sentiments.

"General dentists can do a better job focusing on periodontal health," he said. "If gingivitis was more consistently diagnosed and thoroughly explained to young patients, we could avoid periodontal disease and prevent tooth loss in the future."

Too often, patients associate oral health with simply brushing and flossing.

"In a healthy mouth, that's acceptable," says Thomas Nabors, DDS, AAACD, FAGD, of Nashville. "But the CDC estimates that 50 percent of our patients over age 30 have periodontal disease, which means that half of our adult patients are not healthy."

Many insist that dentists need to reframe the message to better persuade patients.

"They need to emphasize that the oral cavity is the gateway to general health," Glassman says. "Patients need to learn that periodontal disease and other oral infections may lead to increased inflammation in other parts of our body, which may lead to disease."

Others feel that dentists must alter their mindset and focus on rendering quality preventive care that addresses their patients' needs — not insurance benefits.

"Some dentists allow insurance coverage to dictate services provided to their patients," says Bobbi Stanley, DDS, MAGD, DICOI, FLVI, of Cary, N.C. "Oftentimes, if insurance does not pay a benefit for the service, the dentist will not offer it to his or her patients. The emphasis should be put on the importance and benefit of the procedure and not what the insurance pays."

The Benefits of Focusing on Prevention

New York City-based dentist Jonathan Levine, DMD, says a preventive-focused practice provides ample perks.

"It builds your reputation, creates happy patients, makes for a happy staff and promotes a positive culture for the practice that is focused on excellence on all levels."

Most importantly, preventive dentistry can save lives. For example, after noticing white spots on the underside of a patient's tongue, Glassman referred her to have a biopsy, which confirmed a precancerous condition that was soon treated via surgery.

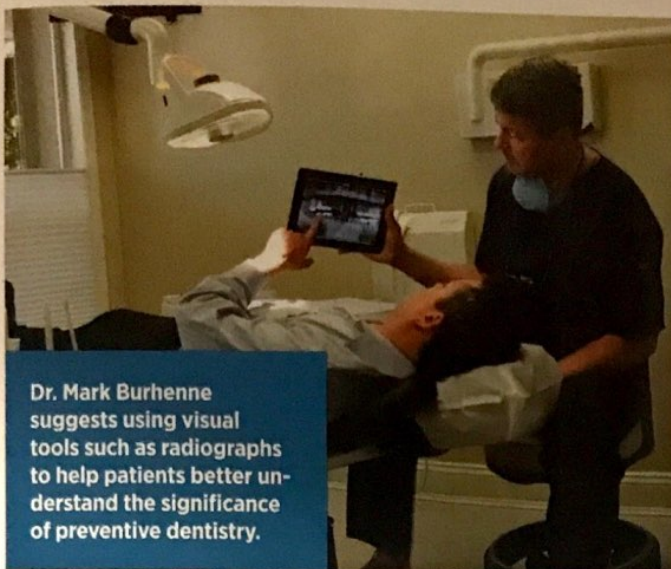
"This patient believed that if she had not been in the habit of seeing her dentist regularly, her cancer may not have been diagnosed and treated in time," Glassman says. "To this day, she says she's grateful for the lessons I had taught her in the past about [oral health]."

Neal Nealis, DDS, of Chicago, says his practice has thrived because his patients trust that he will do what's best for them.

"We are placing the patients' needs at the center of our focus, not their pocketbook," he said.

Dentists who position themselves to help patients be proactive and adopt a more protective approach can reap considerable benefits.

"Experience has shown that the preventive care approach builds loyalty, increases referrals and makes the dental team and the patient true partners in fighting oral disease," Glassman says.



Dr. Mark Burhenne suggests using visual tools such as radiographs to help patients better understand the significance of preventive dentistry.

Shifting the spotlight more on preventive treatment and less on restorative and cosmetic dentistry can also result in a more flexible, open schedule.

"Dentists could then see more preventive care patients to offset the decrease in restorative care," Sung says. "A more open schedule could also allow for more emergency and walk-in patients, which, after helping them, could improve a dentist's reputation in the community."

Burhenne acknowledges that primarily focusing on restorative and/or cosmetic care can pay greater financial dividends initially.

"But," he says, "in the long run, it won't." There are a lot of areas where prevention can be lucrative and make our practices vital." He notes that one of these areas is the treatment of sleep apnea via oral appliances.

The key to reaping the financial rewards of preventive dentistry is to foster patient fidelity and fulfillment.

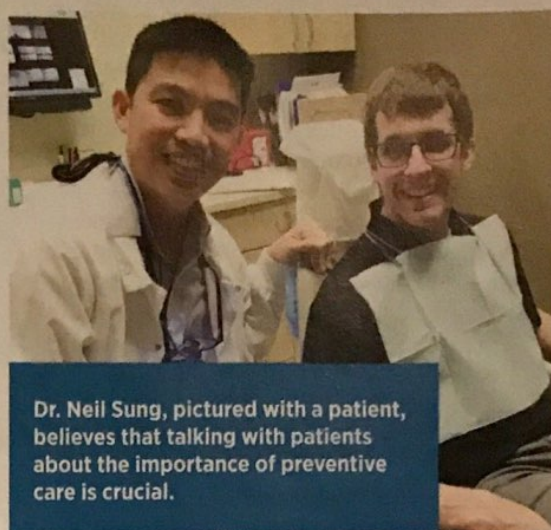
"Satisfied patients remain loyal and are less likely to leave a trustworthy dentist, even when they change insurance plans," Glassman says. "This loyalty creates a stable, predictable revenue stream. It also significantly reduces a practice's overhead costs because, for example, there may not be as much need for advertising and promotions to attract replacement patients."

Contented customers also tend to share their positive experiences with others via word-of-mouth and social media.

"This kind of feedback can attract additional patients and the revenue they bring with them, which can lead to reduced advertising overhead," Glassman says.

Pleased patients can even help dentists become more efficient and effective.

"Long-term patient relationships provide deep insights into the most effective treatments and prevention, such as adhesive dentistry applications, crown material selections and periodontal therapy applications," Glassman said. "This experience can save money for patients and practices alike because it eliminates time and expense of less effective approaches."



Dr. Neil Sung, pictured with a patient, believes that talking with patients about the importance of preventive care is crucial.

To ensure that this preventive paradigm will resonate with patients (and prevent them from skipping their recommended checkups and cleanings), appeal to their bottom line with a simple message: Preventive dentistry is more affordable than the alternatives. According to ADA's Action for Dental Health report, national average costs of typical preventive care are relatively affordable: \$32 for a topical fluoride application; \$44 for a periodic exam by a general dentist or a sealant application per tooth; and \$61 to \$82 for prophylaxis. Compare that to the national average price tag for a resin-based composite filling in a rear tooth (\$197), a root canal on a molar minus the final crown (\$919) or a porcelain crown (\$1,026).

Developing a Philosophy

For best success in promoting prevention, Glassman suggests committing to a philosophy focused on relationships and trust between the practitioner and patient — a credo that's based on sound principles and strong core values.

"Your philosophy is significant in that it forms a framework, defines your identity as a dentist and provides motivation to your staff and peers," he says.

Stanley recommends basing your preventive care philosophy not only on your clinical experience but also on current research, which means staying current on preventive improvements in dentistry by taking CE courses and reading journal articles.

Nealis' chosen philosophy is that effectively communicating prevention to patients actually leads to better treatment and outcomes. "For example, replacing an old silver amalgam filling before it hurts

requires the placement of a fresh restoration. But if the patient does not understand the consequences of not acting now and instead waits until the tooth begins to hurt, the infection in the dentin will progress into a second infection in the pulp. This will require a root canal and full-coverage crown.

"It is my responsibility to explain, in terms that the patient understands, how they will benefit and improve their health by acting sooner rather than later. If the patient does not accept care, and the tooth develops complications, I often feel that it was a shortcoming on my part and that I have to improve my communication skills."

Building a Better Bond

Indeed, communication is a crucial driver in the preventive dentistry journey. And to communicate effectively, you have to be willing to nurture a better relationship with your patients.

"The success of any dental practice is based upon the establishment of a trusting relationship with each patient through personal and professional integrity, concise communication, empathy, compassionate care and education," Kerr says.

Developing a strong relationship with your patients begins with caring about them, not just their teeth, Stanley says.

"Spending time talking with your patients to understand their lifestyle can help a dentist structure a preventive program that is customized for that patient."

And the way you communicate can be just as important as the message itself.

"Your chairside communication style should be compassionate," Glassman says. "Be friendly. Say the patient's name while talking to them, look them in the eye and assure them that you care."

Another recommendation is to be aware of your tone when talking with patients.

"We cannot chastise them," Burhenne says. "Instead, be positive and encouraging. And reinforce the six-month recall visit."

Lastly, think big picture — not small screen.

Levine says, "Dentists need to take the long view of building a trusting relationship with their patient, not the short view of how much dentistry can be done over a short period of time." ♦

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Advocating for Prevention

Try these tips to convince your patients of the magnitude and merits of preventive care:

- **Emphasize preventive care in your marketing tools.** Spread the message in your brochures, videos, social media platforms and website. "Stressing the importance of preventive care is a way to drive more patients to your office," says Gary Glassman, DDS, FRCD(C). "It shows them that you care and want to not only save them money in the long run but also assist in preventing dental issues before they even set foot in your office. On my website, I provide a great deal of tips and FAQs to set the right tone and vibe for potential patients."
- **Employ high-tech tools.** Use an intraoral camera, radiographs, digital imaging and other visual aids to demonstrate the importance of preventive care. "Patients have a better understanding of our concerns for their oral wellness when we show them what we see by using these tools," says Wayne Kerr, DDS, MAGD.
- **Take advantage of a captive audience.** "If your office has televisions in the lobby, educational videos or slideshows should be continuously playing to inform your patients of the benefits of preventive treatment," suggests Bobbi Stanley, DDS, MAGD, DICOI, FLVI.
- **Use language and examples that patients understand.** Try analogies and metaphors. "When I illustrate the importance of flossing to young patients, I compare it to washing a car," says Neil Sung, DMD. "I say, 'You wouldn't forget to wash all the sides of your car during a car wash, right? Well if you don't floss regularly, you're missing the two most important sides of a tooth.'"
- **Stress prevention beyond dentistry.** "Checking blood pressure regularly, screening for oral cancer, referring suspected problems to other experts, and being preventive in care from early diagnosis and treatment of periodontal disease to minimally invasive tooth procedures are all universally appreciated by people," says Thomas Nabors, DDS, AAACD, FAGD.