



MEDIA RELEASE

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Dental Detectives

Oral health is closely linked to overall health, so it is not uncommon for a dentist to be the first health professional to spot a medical problem.

Dentists go through rigorous education, and like a medical doctor, are well-equipped to take thorough written medical histories and vital signs, and observe even subtle changes in the patients they treat.

“Because many people go to a dentist regularly, we get to know our patients well,” said Dr. Randall Croutze, past-president of the Alberta Dental Association and College. “We constantly assess not only oral health, but overall health. If we see a patient with changes in their posture, skin colour or breathing, or if someone has tremors, swollen ankles or tells us they are always thirsty, we know more investigation is needed.”

Dr. Croutze says a discerning dentist uses a combination of signs (what they see) and symptoms (what they are told) to determine whether they need to refer the patient to a dental specialist or a medical doctor for further diagnosis and treatment.

Some of the signs “dental detectives” watch for include cobble stone fissures in the mouth which can denote gastro-intestinal diseases such as Crohn’s. Swollen lips can also indicate Crohn’s, ulcerative colitis and similar gastro-intestinal diseases.

People with reflux disease, bulimia or on street drugs like crystal meth will present with eroded teeth and gums from the constant exposure to acids.

Chronic liver disease or hepatitis can result in thin, yellowish gum tissue, and candidas (thrush) will cause white patches to appear. “Candidas is often a sign of an underlying disease that is compromising the immune system,” says Croutze.

Dry mouth occurs when the salivary glands are not functioning well and can be a symptom of several conditions, which range from aging to Sjogrens disease, which is a connective tissue disease, and oral cancers can be detected by dentists.

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“It is important for people to tell us about all the physical changes they have noticed and let us do a thorough exam,” adds Croutze. “Sometimes what could be a sign of a serious disease is simply a reaction to medication or stress. We spend considerable time with our patients; they trust us and have confidence in what we say and do.”

It is also important for patients to inform their dentist of any chronic disease or treatment they are undergoing. Dentists have specialized training in treating people with a variety of underlying conditions. People with prostheses such as artificial joints, pacemakers or heart valves, or on chemotherapy for cancer are prone to infections so antibiotics may be prescribed before or after treatment.

Patients on blood thinners due to heart problems or surgical interventions, or who have hemophilia where the blood fails to clot properly may need to have their medications monitored and/or adjusted to reduce the risks posed by some dental procedures like extractions or surgery. “We work with the U of A blood clinic to regulate their medications,” says Croutze. “Indeed we frequently work in tandem with our medical colleagues when treating anyone with an unusual condition.”

With so many potential risks, infection control procedures are paramount. All equipment is sterilized not once, but several times, and furniture and other surfaces are wiped down with disinfectant between every patient. Dentists and staff wear disposable gloves and face masks to protect themselves and their patients. “The Alberta Dental Association and College is proud of the safety record of its member dentists,” adds Croutze. “We are not concerned about treating people with infectious diseases, even when it is unknown, as our universal procedures are so stringent.”

To find out more about oral health care and treatment, talk to your dentist or go to the Alberta Dental Association and College website www.abda.ab.ca.-

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