



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Oral health as part of overall health**

Research has proven there is a strong link between oral health and overall health. Though medicine and dentistry have operated in separate but parallel spheres for many years, today's doctors and dentists know there is a strong link between the two and research offers proof. Pregnant women are prone to delivering premature babies if their teeth and gums are neglected or infected. Young children with many cavities can experience fever and infection elsewhere in their bodies. Older adults with poor health can lose teeth sooner; those with osteoporosis will have bone loss that affects the teeth and jaws.

Dr. Sreenivas Koka, Chair of Dental Specialties at the Mayo Clinic, was in Alberta recently to speak at the Alberta Dental Association and College annual congress. A researcher who explores oral-systemic links, Dr. Koka has most recently been investigating the use of saliva to measure bone turnover, the prequel to osteoporosis.

“Right now, we use blood and urine to test for many medical conditions,” said Dr. Koka. “Why not saliva? It may be easier to draw a sample from this body fluid than others, particularly for the elderly, and may well reveal as much.”

As a dentist, much of Dr. Koka's work centers around bone loss and how to prevent it. “I like working with the elderly and finding ways to improve their health and quality of life,” he said. “My recent work is in osteoporosis, a common disease of old age, and it can lead to all sorts of complications. One study showed that 25% of people with a hip fracture die within four months of experiencing the break; 50% can't walk across a room unaided a year later. Dentists and physicians ideally work together to educate patients on ways to prevent this disease and also observe signs of bone loss so they can start the patient on medications.”

Osteoporosis and bone loss are slowed by the ingestion of bisphosphonate medication, but some people are reluctant to take it because of rumors that it may cause disfigurement to the jaw and face, a condition called osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ).

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“This is an issue of risk versus benefit,” said Dr. Koka. “It is extremely rare that bisphosphonates would cause damage, and the significant majority of documented ONJ cases were found in people who received large doses of bisphosphonate medication as an adjunct to cancer therapy or who took less potent forms for an extended period of time. If you have osteopenia or osteoporosis, and your physician advises you take these drugs, it is probably good advice. The alternative, fracture of the bone, is far worse.”

Talking with a patient about the various treatment options in dentistry is a foundation of the profession. Both practitioners and researchers explain what each option can or cannot do, the supportive evidence available, and the associated maintenance and cost of treatment.

“Many of today’s patients want information before they make a decision, and dentists are well prepared, and indeed obligated, to give them information and statistics about the latest technology or technique, and the evidence that supports it,” said Dr. Koka. “Many will also want advice and they ask their dentist ‘what would you do if you were me?’ Presented the wrong way, it can be presumptive on the part of the dentist to assume that their own beliefs and preferences should supersede those of the patient. To that end, although the dentist’s expert opinion is valuable, ultimately, the decision belongs to the patient.”

Dr. Koka cited tooth loss as an example. Some people may not feel uncomfortable about losing their teeth, so may not agree to treatment such as root canals or crowns that help preserve them. People who have lost teeth are faced with a range of options including bridges, implants, a combination of bridges and implants, or dentures. “Some care about function, some about aesthetics, some about cost. Culture, personality and values play a large role in each person’s decision making, and we need to respect that.”

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](http://www.abda.ab.ca).

**Media contact:**

Kimberly McDonald, Director  
Marketing, Communications & Member Services  
Alberta Dental Association and College  
Phone: (780) 432-1012 or toll free 1-800-843-3848