CONSEQUENCES OF UNTREATED ORAL DISEASE

In addition to pain and discomfort, untreated oral disease can have consequences for both adult and children. Some of the economic, medical, and social consequences are described below:

**Economic Consequences**

The economic consequences of untreated oral disease stem from limited productivity among workers and the sheer cost of treating oral disease that could have been prevented. Children with poor oral health are nearly three times more likely to miss school due to dental pain, according to a CDHP national study. Early experience with dental problems can have lasting effects through adulthood, limiting productive employment. Adults lose an estimated $164 million more of hours work each year due to oral health problems or dental visits. It is widely accepted that prevention pays off in the long run. According to dentist and Stony Brook University professor of oral biology and pathology Maria Emanuel, periodontal (gum) disease can not only cause more extensive damage to the teeth and mouth but can also lead to medical problems in the rest of the body. This increases the overall cost of health care, when preventive care or earlier intervention could have remedied the problem.

**Medical Consequences**

One of the most important ways people can maintain their overall health is by maintaining their oral health. Improving access to dental care and investing in prevention pays off in the long run. According to dentist and Stony Brook University professor of oral biology and pathology Maria Emanuel, periodontal disease is “initiated by bacteria that on their own do not cause the disease, but react in concert with risk factors that make a person susceptible, such as genetics, diabetes, obesity, smoking, fasting, immune disorders, stress, and more.” Access to regular dental services can help people control chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, and can help prevent premature births.1

**Social Consequences**

People with oral health can suffer socially as well as physically. Severe oral disease negatively impacts a person’s appearance, which in turn can result in lower self-esteem and is a major cause of bullying in middle school, making it particularly difficult for children to make friends.

Children with poor dental health are more likely to perform poorly in school and are four times more likely to have a lower grade point average than their peers without dental pain.4

CNBC reported that most employers “make instant judgements based upon appearance, including someone’s smile and teeth.” A 2008 study found that people with missing front teeth were viewed as less intelligent, least desirable, and less trustworthy than people with a healthy smile.5

The Medicaid Working Healthy program in Kansas is one of the most successful examples of how adults with disabilities who have been dependent on assistance can maintain a job if they have the right supports. Because people in the Working Healthy program are able to buy their Medicaid coverage, they have greater independence, more self-esteem, and can stay healthy. Satisfaction surveys in that program reveal that enrollees frequently cite dental services as one of their most urgent needs. Two enrollees disclosed on their surveys:

• “I believe the biggest health issue for me currently is dental services—my teeth are cracked & broken. I feel self-conscious because of the economic harm I cause to myself and my teeth can not cause the disease, but react in concert with risk factors that make a person susceptible, such as genetics, diabetes, obesity, smoking, fasting, immune disorders, stress, and more.”

• “I need lots of dental work—so much that I physically get sick—need help getting dentures.”

When people can live free of dental pain and feel confident in something as simple as their smile, they are happier and more productive. 6

Programs that are designed to reach children at a young age can stem the tide of growing dental costs. Unabated growth of oral disease can not only cause more extensive damage to the oral cavity, but also lead to medical problems in the rest of the body. This increases the overall cost of health care, when preventive care or earlier intervention could have remedied the problem. Americans made an estimated 2.2 million visits to hospital emergency rooms in 2012 for dental conditions that were preventable.7 Emergency rooms frequently become the provider of last resort for people who are uninsured, including for people who have no means to pay for dental care. Dental services are not available in emergency rooms, which means people who seek treatment for dental pain receive prescriptions and referrals, but no dental services which may result in additional trips to the ER with increased complication costs and poor oral health. Improving access to dental care and investing in prevention pays off in the long run. According to dentist and Stony Brook University professor of oral biology and pathology Maria Emanuel, periodontal disease is “initiated by bacteria that on their own do not cause the disease, but react in concert with risk factors that make a person susceptible, such as genetics, diabetes, obesity, smoking, fasting, immune disorders, stress, and more.” Access to regular dental services can help people control chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, and can help prevent premature births.1

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