



We can do more: The role of dentists extends beyond traditional dentistry



Eli Eliav

The training and education of dentists today, as well as the work done by dentists, encompass more than many people realize. Dentists can help in areas that are not directly related to what is considered traditional dentistry.

The education of dental students includes the anatomy, physiology, and pathology of the entire human body, necessary to properly comprehend the workings of oral tissues and see the patient as a whole. The human body functions as a single, synchronized unit. Treating any individual system, whether it is the cardiovascular system, the gastrointestinal tract, or the oral cavity, requires a thorough understanding of the entire organism and its intricate physiology. Treatment of a patient at any level will always be affected by his or her current and past physical and mental health conditions.

As such, any visit to the dentist's office, whether it is a routine check up or a part of a dental procedure, is in fact a visit to a health professional, and can play a key role in the monitoring of ongoing health conditions and even in the early diagnosis of diseases at their onset. Blood pressure and glucose level monitoring as part of the general evaluation of any dental patient have been discussed in the literature extensively. It has been shown that these can significantly help track changes in the patient's condition.

Dentists also have unique capabilities and experience not offered by other health professionals that can improve care of the patient as a whole. Since the damage caused by cigarette smoking can often first manifest in the oral cavity, dentists can initiate the process of quitting with many patients. This can extend to a public health effort for smoking cessation led by dentists. As the first to recognize potential pathologic

changes caused by smoking in oral and pharyngeal tissues, dentists can provide early diagnosis of life-threatening diseases and treat them appropriately. Extensive research has delved into the potential correlation between smoking-related pathologic changes, such as periodontal disease and systemic diseases, particularly cardiovascular pathologies.

Working as dentists, we meet almost daily with patients suffering from acute and chronic pain conditions, and by working with these patients we gain more experience in behavior management and pain control than most healthcare professionals. The immense experience and knowledge acquired by dentists in this field can be applied to other health conditions not directly related to dentistry.

The dentistry profession is not limited to the clinic, as dentists around the world can contribute and lead efforts to aid in disaster-stricken areas, like those following the recent devastating earthquakes and hurricanes. As healthcare professionals, dentists can lead first responder teams and provide life-saving first aid care. Dentists study and practice anesthetic techniques as part of routine work, and can assist anesthesiologists in disaster area hospitals in a time of need. Furthermore, in the face of such tragedies, dentists trained in forensic dentistry can be crucial in the identification process of natural disaster victims, giving their loved ones at least some closure at an impossible time.

As part of the healthcare society, we should expand our role and lead volunteering efforts to improve health and support the community.

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