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# What's the Value of a Child's Smile?

Opinion / **Published On September 12, 2021 06:47 AM /**

Staff Consortium **September 12, 2021**

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As Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Dental Association and a practicing Pediatric Dentist in the Territory for more than 20 years, I would like to take this opportunity to update my fellow Virgin Islanders about the value of oral health and the important role it plays in overall health.

Emerging research points to dental health as being critically important to everyone's total health throughout their lifespan. Each stage of life brings an opportunity for optimal health, if we know how to recognize it.

As parents, we attach a lot of importance to our children meeting their developmental milestones including learning how to speak, eat, socialize and smile. We expect our children to naturally have healthy teeth and gums, but this requires us to have an awareness of what that takes. It is all too easy for us to assume that everyone knows good dental hygiene.

Over the years, I have seen many children in my practice who have never owned a toothbrush, and have extensive dental disease (which is costly to restore). These children have suffered greatly from something that should not be occurring in the 21st century. Undiagnosed and untreated dental decay account for many schoolchildren, missing several instructional days at school, when this could have easily been avoided.

Our awareness needs to also focus on pregnant women who need optimum oral health during pregnancy, they are eating for two or sometimes three. Studies show improved birth outcomes when mothers have routine oral health care. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology has officially stated that dental care throughout all 9 months of pregnancy is safe.

There are many misconceptions in the community. For example, many people think that “baby teeth” are not important because they are “lost” or shed during childhood. Not true! The last baby tooth is not lost until approximately age 10 or 11. And I see some children with badly decayed front teeth, -as early as age 2 - suffering mercilessly with severe pain and sleepless nights. Isn’t that a long time to be in pain and not able to smile?

Persons living with diabetes have been shown to have better control of their condition when they have adequate preventive dental care. Many physicians collaborate with dentists to provide integrated and improved patient care by making the necessary referrals.

Prevention, of course, is key to preventing dental disease. The Virgin Islands Dental Association is working with the American Dental Association and local agencies to bring awareness to, and improve, oral health in the Territory. We have created a Five-Year Oral Health Plan which calls for more attention and resources be given to children services; to elevate the importance of oral health and cost-effective improvements for the dental portion of the Medical Assistance Program (MAP).

Isn’t it up to all of us – particularly the U.S, Virgin Islands health community- to see that our children receive preventive dental services such as teeth cleanings, examinations, and topical fluoride treatments to strengthen tooth enamel?

What is the value of a child’s smile? When we have our most vulnerable citizens, our children, having predictable access to dental care, their world will be a healthier place. Isn’t that what they deserve? They are our future, aren’t they worth it?

***Submitted on Thursday, Sept. 9, 2021 by:***

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