Knowing-doing gap in dentistry
by Ana Stevanović

According to a recently published study, 38 million adults in USA will be in need for one or two complete dentures by the year 2020. Yet, what are we doing to fix this shocking prognosis? There are over 14 million implant placements per year worldwide. The investments to prevent implant complications have hence risen significantly. But are we doing enough to reduce the need for implants in the first place?

Knowing that the cause of 99 percent of dental diseases is no other than biofilm, how are our predictions still so pessimistic on the future of oral health? Despite being aware of all these facts and prediction in today’s dentistry, results indicate that we are not doing much – not enough. There is a huge difference between knowing and doing. A gap between intention to make a change and the action of change. This gap we, as dental professionals, experience daily. So, the question is simple: How to bridge knowledge with action? As a dentist, communication with my patients was never an easy part of my job. For example, telling them to brush better. What does ‘brushing better’ even mean? If I simply said to apply a Bass technique, I would see 100 different forms of a technique.

A changing world without change
My colleague once said that patients are responsible for their own health. I couldn’t agree more. But as medical experts, don’t we first have to empower and teach them how to do exactly that? Only then, they can be fully responsible for it. We first have to give them the ability/knowledge and skills to take care of their oral health themselves. Truth is, most patients have received their oral care instruction from their parents. This contradicts the modern approach of individual prophylaxis we have been learning about in school. This is the gap we need to link.

In today’s dentistry, there seems not enough time for proper training and instruction. Patients either aren’t willing pay for this service or you do not have the time during your appointment. Most countries do not have the luxury of a one hour appointments with a dental hygiene specialist which allows for enough time for cleaning and instruction. Switzerland or Canada are blessed to have regular dental hygiene appointments that are covered by basic insurance. A factor that makes instruction more welcome and accepted. But, some other countries allow less time for dental hygiene. Such countries will and have to follow the examples in order to implement an effective knowledge transfer during dental appointment.

Unacceptable status quo
One thing, we will always have to deal with is the paradigms of our patients. "I get caries no matter what I am doing or how much I brush." "My parents too had bad teeth." Or "a tooth can be easily replaced today."

Firstly, patients are quick to put the blame on their parents or point the finger at us dental professionals. Further, dentistry is still associated with a lot of discomfort. And lastly, patients know about the services and fixes available. Charles Winslow, the founder of Yale Department of Public Health, once said: "It is a duty of each generation to redefine unacceptable." It is a duty of every generation to redefine that having 38 million people in one country without teeth is unacceptable. Aren’t 38 million US Americans with at least one denture absolutely unacceptable? We live in such a changing, fast-tracking world, we have lost connection to our mission – and sometimes to our patients, too. It’s time to change the status quo.
Change must be accepted
How do we achieve this change? The answer seems too simple to be true. Through the service of coaching. In today’s world, there’s hardly any product sold without added service. No treatment without maintenance. No dental practice without dental hygiene. In-depth instructions have become crucial for the success of a product. Isn’t a dental office an accumulation of service efforts? Why, since we as dental professionals have the competence, don’t we include coaching as a service in a dental practice?
Successful coaching in dentistry depends on three crucial factors: Make connections. Develop trust Grow relationships. Patients should not be treated once in the dental practice, but becoming part of a long-term relationship with your office. It is not about regularly bringing in new patients but cultivating the ones you already have. The most modern practice and the friendliest team are of no avail, if your patients don’t stay with you.
Personalized connection through individual coaching is key to building a long-term relationship. No technology can replace a durable connection between a dental professional and a patient. Digitalisation can not replace trust.

A programme designed for change
This is why we brought iTOP to life. Individually trained oral prophylaxis (iTOP) is a programme introduced 20 years ago by Dr. Jiri Sedelmayer, a dentist who worked at the University of Hamburg. During his work at the faculty, he realised that dental students studied every detail about restoration, but knew nothing about keeping their own mouth healthy. Dental students never practically learned any techniques to maintain their own oral health. This is why he established iTOP – to train his future dental professionals.
What started in 2006 with one two-day course, has since been attended by more than 14,000 dental professionals worldwide. iTOP runs with the support of over 200 instructors in 44 countries. In our seminars, we do not differentiate between a dental hygienist, nurse, dentist or oral surgeon. All of their daily work contributes likewise to the cause of shifting the paradigm from restoration to lifelong oral health. Each of their endeavours aspires the best for their own health, health of their family members, friends and patients. All of them share one common understanding: „Clean teeth cannot get sick” A clean tooth cannot get sick.
The iTOP programme is based on three simple criteria: Acceptable, affective, non-traumatic. These pillars are the foundation for all oral health care products we from Curaden produce today.

Knowing is good, action is better
In order to achieve clean teeth, we have a unique practical trainings-concept called Touch to Teach (T2T). It’s based on the idea of experiencing the iTOP know-how on yourself first, before teaching it to others. No phantom course or model will ever replace the feeling of a toothbrush, interdental brush and solo brush on your own teeth and gums. Oral health needs to be taught individually and practically. Going back to the basics is what’s sometimes necessary to achieve change in the future.
There continues to be a huge gap between knowing and doing. But let me be clear: What we know, we need to be repeatedly doing. Every single day. It is our job to repair the teeth. But it is our mission to keep our patients healthy. We should not confuse our job with our mission. Only by doing this, in twenty years, we will have achieved that those 38 million people live smiling with their own healthy teeth.

Something about the author: Ana Stevanović, DMD, MSc is Head of Professional Education for the company Curaden AG. She speaks in numerous events on importance of paradigm shift in dentistry. Her background as dentist, manager and a development coach helps to bring the best in her work with both dental professionals and patients, shaping the mind of individual in order to change the future of oral care.

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