Dentists’ role in reducing tobacco use

The costs of tobacco-induced death and suffering are far greater than the profits generated by the tobacco industry. In the USA, dentists play a pivotal role in promoting smoking cessation and offering advice and information on the oral health effects of tobacco use.1 Some private dental clinics even offer smokers oral cancer screening. It is well documented that tobacco use causes a number of problems in the mouth, including gum problems - which can lead to the development of periodontal destruction, which in turn can lead to tooth loss - and oral cancer including that resulting from chewing tobacco. The latter is the highest of all cancers in India, accounting for 35%. In the UK it is also becoming of great concern – over 3,400 new cases of mouth cancer (3-5% of all cancers) are diagnosed each year.2-3

Unfortunately 70% of smokers in the UK are unaware of the local smoking cessation services offered on the NHS.4 New guidelines have been issued for dentists on mouth cancers and smoking: ‘New Guideline for Dentists: Mouth Cancer and Tobacco’ was published by the British Dental Association last year.5

Counselling by a health professional has been shown to be a method that is both preferred by smokers and reportedly effective in reducing smoking. The dental clinic is an ideal setting for tobacco counselling: patient education, prevention advice and screening already takes place in some clinics in developing countries and seems to be working effectively.4

As dentists are an important component of health promotion services, they have a promising role to play in Government initiatives to reduce tobacco use. However, very few dental clinics in the UK provide tobacco cessation services on a regular basis. Some dental professionals feel that patients would not be receptive to tobacco cessation services, and that any attempts to provide such services may alienate their patients. Oral health professionals’ perception of patients’ attitudes is an influencing factor in their decision to provide preventive health services. Providing advice on smoking cessation within dental clinics in the UK will not work until, or unless, there is a specific strategy to save millions of pounds by UK dentists.

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References