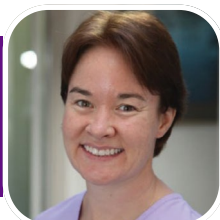




Alzheimer's and oral care



Ahead of World Alzheimer's Month this September, **Diane Rochford**, President of the British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy (BSDHT), advises dental professionals to take the time to understand individuals with this condition.

September 2021 is World Alzheimer's Month and 21 September is World Alzheimer's Day in the UK. Once September rolls around, it is time to focus on this condition and how it can impact individuals from receiving the oral health care they require.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia and it is estimated that there are currently 850,000 people living with dementia in the UK. Worryingly, this figure is set to increase drastically, with projections forecasting a rise to over 1.5 million individuals by 2040.¹

As such, dental professionals need to understand the requirements of patients with dementia and be able to provide the support and care they need.

In the early stages of dementia, dental care for these individuals is unlikely to be any different from treating a patient without the condition. At this stage, patients are often able to brush their own teeth and will remember to stick to dental hygiene routines, especially as these are habits that have likely been in place for a lifetime. However, as dementia progresses, it becomes necessary for us to be aware of any potential future problems and to highlight these so that they do not cause unnecessary suffering further down the line. This way, the patient can get these issues seen to now and have a better chance of maintaining good oral health moving forward.

'As dementia progresses, it [is] necessary for us to be aware of any potential future problems and to highlight these so that they do not cause unnecessary suffering down the line.'

Once dementia has progressed and the patient has lost some of their cognitive abilities, a smart tactic is to focus more heavily on prevention. Patients at this stage may require anaesthesia during treatment, and it is around this time that a more detailed look at consent needs to come into play. They will likely have a carer or family support at this point, but it is still important to speak to the patient directly and get them to take part in the decisions surrounding their treatment. Use simple language, and try to make questions lead to straightforward yes or no answers. This way, you can keep the patient as involved as possible while also still obtaining the consent required.

The latter stages of dementia will mean that you inevitably have to direct these conversations more regularly to carers/family members, but that doesn't mean you should

not engage with the patient still and try to involve them where appropriate.

Alzheimer's disease and the resulting dementia are conditions that very quickly start to impact oral health. By taking time to understand these patients and work with them and their carers/family support, we can all help these individuals maintain a good standard of oral hygiene for the best standard of life possible.

Reference

1. Alzheimer's Society. Alzheimer's Society's view on demography. Last updated 30 June 2020 Available at: <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-influencing/what-we-think/demography> (accessed 30 June 2021).

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-021-0681-1>