

Why we must act now: 'oral health prevention could change people's lives and reduce inequalities'



Ingrid Perry MBE, newly appointed Prevention

Lead at mydentist, discusses the importance of oral health prevention and how initiatives such as supervised toothbrushing and community fluoride varnish schemes have the power to reduce health inequalities across the UK.

The importance of oral health prevention has never been greater. At its core, oral health prevention is a way to help people keep their mouths healthy and if advice is followed, it could prevent tooth decay and gum disease – both of which are on the rise in the UK.

In some cases, it can also reduce the risk of developing mouth cancer, as well as assisting in the early detection of mouth cancer through regular dental check-ups, ultimately saving people's lives.

While the recent Labour party statements around supervised toothbrushing are welcomed, there is more we can do as dental professionals to lead the way and further aid prevention – for example, working with vulnerable groups such as carers and elderly people in residential care homes.

The aftermath of COVID-19 left many patients with high treatment needs, and with access to care at crisis point, we need to come together as dental care providers to improve the way the general population receive prevention advice and how they can access oral health initiatives in their areas.

In 2024, I envisage that prevention will play a much bigger role than it ever has

before. The NHS has acknowledged that oral health prevention is fundamental in reducing oral health inequalities and as such, there are more opportunities available for practices to become involved in Flexible Commissioning projects.

We must act now to support our communities with preventative advice and safeguard the future of their oral health. At mydentist, we are committed to the prevention model within Flexible Commissioning and are working to build on the progress we have already made across our 550+ practices to ensure we deliver a high-quality service to our local communities.

Having experienced poor oral health as a child myself, my passion and drive to implement meaningful change within our communities is what keeps me motivated, and it's encouraging to see more conversation being driven about prevention.

Speaking from personal experience, I had my first general anaesthetic at the age of three, resulting in the removal of eight of my deciduous teeth. Unfortunately, I had to have general anaesthesia a further six times throughout my childhood due to poor oral health.

Sadly, this resulted in me becoming a target for bullies at my school because my speech was affected, and I looked different to the other children as I had missing teeth. This experience negatively impacted my self-esteem, leading to me becoming a very shy child with no self-confidence. Thankfully, this has changed as I have grown older, and I can now objectively look at my experiences and tap into those memories as a motivation to create positive change for communities and children across the UK through my work and new role at mydentist.

One key aspect we are developing here is delivering prevention initiatives as outreach projects, working with the most vulnerable groups in society to ensure that they receive the vital support that they need – for example the homeless population and those accessing addiction services.

While the tide is certainly turning when it comes to the awareness of the importance of preventative oral health care, there is still work to be done. Having been recently appointed to the role of Prevention Lead at mydentist, I look forward to driving this forward with the support of our teams both at the mydentist Support Centre and those on the ground in our practices. We recognise

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that prevention plays a key role in reducing inequalities in health and appointing a Prevention Lead signals an innovative step towards realising this role.

By working with our practice teams, we will develop a workforce that will be well-placed and supported to implement and facilitate numerous initiatives to help our patients and wider communities. Engagement with key stakeholders such as health visitors, schools and integrated care boards (ICBs) will be a vital step in enhancing the efficacy of these initiatives.

There is no doubt that targeted supervised toothbrushing programmes in schools and nurseries are evidence-based initiatives that have the capacity to change a child's life, as they not only reduce the oral health inequalities in children but also have the potential to change a child's life course. Studies have also shown that daily supervised toothbrushing programmes in schools improve a child's attendance levels, educational attainment levels and self-confidence.

Added to this, we must also consider the potential cost-saving implications of reduced general anaesthesia rates and the emotional wellbeing of a child having to go through such a traumatic procedure. The viability of supervised toothbrushing schemes remains to be seen, but if implemented by the government, it could be life-changing for children in the UK.

Many of our practices are now delivering prevention under flexible commissioning contracts. In Practice Prevention (IPP) sessions are run on a regular basis, facilitated by our practice Oral Health Champions (OHC). Dentists refer patients to the OHC so that they can receive prevention advice that is tailored to their individual needs,

and some patients will be offered several appointments if their needs are complex. Referrals can also be made to local health and wellbeing services such as smoking cessation teams and alcohol advisory teams if appropriate.

Some of our practices also receive referrals from the Looked After Children services (LAC) and health visiting teams so that these vulnerable children are given the best start to having a healthy mouth.

Additionally, Kids Clubs play a major role in many of our practices. It's great to see so many teams across mydentist taking part in them. Local schools and nurseries are invited into their local practice, where the children learn about looking after their teeth. Some of our practice teams also visit schools and nurseries in their local communities to deliver prevention advice to the children within the educational setting.

Looking forward, I am hopeful for the future of oral health prevention in the UK and wholeheartedly believe that it has the ability and impetus to change people's lives for the better. At mydentist, we remain committed to ensuring that our patients receive the correct advice and information relating to the prevention of dental disease, and the steps they can take at home to ensure that their self-care routines are effective.

However, to truly address the health inequalities sweeping the UK and future-proof the oral health of children and our communities, we must all act now and place a bigger lens on oral health prevention than we ever have before.

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