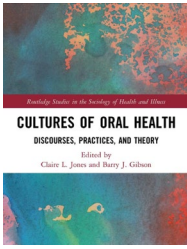


BOOK REVIEW



CULTURES OF ORAL HEALTH

Edited by Claire L. Jones and Barry J. Gibson;
2022; Routledge; £96.00; pp. 260;
ISBN 978-0-367-49851-1 :

Always remember, a wise teacher once told me, that the tooth you are working on is attached to a person. This book reminds us that that person, the patient, also has connections to their culture. Dentistry itself is also a product of the culture within which dental professionals work. It is only by understanding these cultures, the editors argue, that we can attempt to improve oral health. Oral health is a social justice issue which ‘reflects the priorities of the political state of which it forms a part’.

Authored by an international array of academics and edited by a medical historian and a sociologist, the book discourses and theorises on topics from feminism to smile design, from volunteering to dental health among recruits in World War I, via toothpaste advertising in inter war USA and dentures in the writings of Rudyard Kipling.

For example, the paper ‘Designing healthy smiles’ discusses the influence of social media on patient choices and how platforms such as Instagram influence young people about what is a ‘normal’ appearance. ‘Cosmetic’ dentists feed on these aspirations. As a new ‘normal’ appears, where does the power lie in the cosmetic dentist/patient relationship? Are these norms white and Euro-centric, dismissing the views of beauty of other ethnicities?

The final section, on dental humanitarianism, examines the culture of dental volunteering. The need for such voluntary provision has risen (in the USA) because of ‘obliterated budgets for dental public health provision and community dental services.’ If oral health is a social justice issue, short-term volunteering is not the solution. It is the culture and ‘priorities of the political state’ which need to change for oral health to improve. The editors and authors of this volume shy away from that issue.

It is worthwhile to take a step back for an understanding of the bigger picture, to see the context within which oral health services are provided. This book does just that through its historical, sociological and humanities lenses. Dentists though will continue to focus on the tooth, in the mouth of the patient in the chair. It is, after all, what they are paid to do and in the real world, what the patient expects.

Paul Hellyer

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