

# Young adults with caries can improve their health behaviour fast



Dr Jennie Hagman

Young adults with extensive caries often have a high propensity for risk in terms of oral health. At the same time, with the right support and treatment, they can modify their unhealthy behaviours. A thesis at the University of Gothenburg describes the challenges involved in helping patients in this vulnerable category.<sup>1</sup>

In Sweden, oral health has improved markedly over the past few decades. Most people's oral health is now good, but this favourable state is unevenly and inequitably distributed. Certain groups bear a significantly heavier burden of disease, associated with socioeconomic and other factors, than the majority.

Jennie Hagman, a practising dentist in hospital orofacial medicine within Gothenburg's Swedish Public Dental Care services, defended the present thesis in the subject of odontological psychology and public health at Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg. In her thesis, she describes the vulnerability of the young adult age group (aged 18–25).<sup>1</sup>

Many of them move away from home, get a job, and become responsible for their own finances and health. At the same time, they start having to pay for health care – when it comes to dental care, from the year of their 24<sup>th</sup> birthday. Infrequent dental consultations, a high sugar diet, and smoking make up a poor but not unusual mix among young adults with caries.

Hagman's thesis is based on a study in Region Västra Götaland comprising 135 young adults with a high incidence of caries. They were all given standardised oral health information in public dental care within the framework of the study, and half were assigned by chance to receive treatment from a psychologist as well.

The form of therapy concerned is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The treatment consisted of identifying the value of good oral health to the patients and training them in mental skills, such as acceptance. These are skills that may help them establish new, more salubrious oral health habits.

In the group receiving ACT, an immediate impact on health behaviours was evident: their toothbrushing improved, and their use of floss, toothpicks, and fluoride increased. The control group's behaviour changed too, but less so.

A follow-up study showed that those receiving ACT treatment improved their oral health most, although the amount of plaque and gingivitis did not differ significantly between the two groups. The results also indicate a dividing line between women and men: supplementing with ACT treatment seems to have been more efficacious for female oral health.

Dental care services have traditionally attempted to influence patients' oral health-related behaviour by providing information about the causes and progression of oral diseases, and by advising patients on what they need to change if they are to maintain or improve their oral health.

Over the past few decades, the efficacy of this approach has been called into question, and other methods of addressing these problems have been sought. Dr Hagman's thesis is highly germane to the discussion.

The results demonstrate the scope for direct behavioural modification and improved oral health in a group of young adults with extensive caries. Their willingness to undergo psychological treatment intended to impact their behaviour is also in itself a boon.

Dr Hagman said: "These findings show that there's a need to develop effective methods and techniques to promote oral health, and that theory-based methods aimed at modifying people's behaviour can potentially enhance self-care and oral health alike."

## References

1. Hagman J. Young adults and oral health — Oral health behaviors and an intervention for better oral health (Gothenburg University Library). 22 August 2022. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/2077/72051> (accessed December 2022).

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