

Supervised brushing/parenting

By Sharif Islam, a dentist in London, UK

We can usually be sure that if a politician comes up with a way to improve the nation's health then we should probably do the opposite. And when the opposition party (at the time of writing) allege that the primary reason for child admittance to hospital today is tooth decay, you can see them rubbing their hands at the prospect of an opportunity. A calculated gimmick to curry favour and create even more dependency on the state.

Supervised tooth brushing for schoolchildren: presumably a pilot programme before asking teachers to advance onto toilet etiquette (if that's not already happening in some schools).

A nice sounding idea but actually, and ironically, rather corrosive to both the fabric of society and to the responsibilities of parenting. And one that unsurprisingly won't actually deal with the primary cause of tooth decay – but more on that in a moment. If parents are not capable of teaching their children even the basic discipline of brushing their teeth then society has bigger problems that aren't going to be alleviated by a token gesture at taxpayers' expense.

Alas, and no one wants to say it out loud but I will since I'm already a happy pariah: this is symptomatic of a growing culture of absolved responsibility and excuses. Yes, it's my child but I cannot risk my mental health by suffering the crippling stress induced by teaching them how to clean their teeth. Or use cutlery. Or tie their shoelaces. I must instead surrender to ever more state paternalism, which will hopefully encourage an even greater sense of entitlement and absolution of responsibility. At what point does it end? Eventually I'll need a government official to come to my home to sing a lullaby to my infants to help them sleep at night.

It does seem like another political miscalculation from a movement that seems intent on homogenising us all into some sort of collective mediocrity. I doubt anyone will cast their vote at the next election on the basis of a toothbrushing strategy. And as

already mentioned, that isn't going to address the main cause of tooth decay.

The next most intelligent primate in the Terran System is the orangutan, which has only one child every seven to ten years simply because it takes that long to teach it what to eat. So, given that we are the most intelligent and adaptable organism that has ever lived, how much time do we spend teaching our children about nutrition, the single most important factor in the destiny of their health?

'No one wants to say it out loud but I will since I'm already a happy pariah: this is symptomatic of a growing culture of absolved responsibility and excuses.'

It's perceived to be complicated (it really isn't) and seemingly everyone has their own food religion, but there is one truth almost universally accepted and that affects dental structural health more than anything else. Sugar. Regardless of how well one may brush their teeth, if (particularly refined) sugar is consistently going into the mouth the risk of tooth decay will remain high. Inherent individual predisposition aside, if there is no sugar, indigenous oral bacteria such as *Strep mutans* will have far less to metabolise to produce the acid to decay the teeth. Not complicated.

Brushing regularly with a fluoridated toothpaste does, of course, confer important protection. But curtailing sugar intake is higher up that checklist by some margin. There are plenty of less developed countries in the world where the children have no access to shiny toothbrushes and fluoride toothpaste. But their beaming smiles can almost be seen from orbit because they also don't have access to the plethora of refined sugary foods that we do.

However, giving dietary advice in schools is presumably far too ridiculous an idea, even though it helps to solve not just tooth decay but a lot of the so-called downstream

effects, such as obesity and diabetes (both of which are affecting our child population now). Did the opposition party not think that unburdening the nation's beloved health service from persistent and costly chronic disease would be a potential vote-winner? Nope. We can't do that. Supervised brushing in schools is a gimmick, remember, so it's the political equivalent of suggesting a small wet wipe to stop a patient exsanguinating from their wound. It gives the appearance of taking action, regardless of how anaemic that action is, and that's really all that matters politically. They've said it's merely one part of an overall plan, a political metonym of that old cliché: *comprehensive raft of measures*, which itself translates to *no real clue what to do*.

Since we're all addicted to screens, limiting advertising of sugary snacks and drinks after an afternoon watershed is certainly another useful idea. And suggesting that oral hygiene advertising is not only prevalent in the evening but also encourages nocturnal brushing is probably more effective (both for the advertiser and the audience) than any government-funded official.

I suspect that by the time the election actually arrives, the little noise around this absurd policy will be drowned out by more pertinent issues such as the economy, GP appointments and the cost of energy. So, shame on me for taking the bait and rebuking and debunking it. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what the politics are or whose idea it is. If children are being admitted to hospital *en masse* due to tooth decay, that is undoubtedly a tragedy. But asking the state to place yet another Band-Aid on the problem will never supplant the primary responsibility of parents or the collective responsibility they have with dental educators. It will simply be yet another gimmick that we all have to pay for but will yield little return on the investment.

Now who wants to sing me a lullaby? (Yeah, I thought so...) ■ *