

Psychiatric illness and dentistry: Challenges for oral care

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Psychiatric illness and its medical management carry significant risks for oral disease. Although mental illness is common, in many cases it is misunderstood, remains unrecognized, or is undertreated. Mental illness and the resulting disabilities create difficulties not only for the patient but also for one's family and friends, not the least of which remains the highly stigmatized nature of the disease itself.

Understanding the type, severity, stage of mental illness, along with a patient's own mood, motivation and personal perceptions of oral disease and lifestyle can enhance the knowledge of dental professionals concerning this critical aspect of a patient's medical history and further illustrates how closely mental health and oral health are intertwined.

Mental illness must be viewed from a similar perspective as are other major diseases. Dental professionals should be aware of factors such as the reduced rates of compliance with dental treatment, reduced ability to access oral health care, the effects of various psychotropic medications on oral health including xerostomia, caries and periodontal disease and the potential interactions with drugs used in dental practice.

Patients with psychiatric illness often bring unique needs and differing priorities to a dental practice, and the dental health practitioner must in turn demonstrate patience, flexibility, empathy, and a non-stigmatizing attitude in caring for these individuals. Enhancing self-esteem and feelings of self-worth for those coping with a psychiatric illness can be a very fulfilling experience that can only serve to continue to break down the stigma surrounding this group of diseases.

Biography:

David Clark is Clinic Director of Dental Services at Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences in Whitby, Ontario, and is also an Associate, Clinical Dentistry, Department of Oral Medicine, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Toronto. He obtained his MSc. in Oral Pathology at the University of Western Ontario in 1986 and is a Fellow of the Royal College of Dentists of Canada, the Pierre Fauchard Academy and Academy of Dentistry International. His hospital-based practice is devoted to the general dental care of individuals undergoing primary care for various forms of psychiatric illness co-existing with other medically compromising conditions.