

Guest Editorial

Anticipatory Guidance is Failing Due to North American Lifestyles

In December of 2010, I attended a Symposium on Nutrition in Chicago chaired by Dr. Paul Casamassimo and sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. The outstanding opening address by Dr. M. Nestle, a renowned nutritionist, made it very clear to all attendees how the "lay public are being negatively manipulated and duped by the food industry in terms of diet and nutrition." Dr. Nestle also stated that "in many instances the food industry has little to no moral or ethical concerns, but is purely profit driven." While I am all in favor of capitalism, it must have a conscience! Products that are of no to little nutritional value are being promoted by the food industry to children and youth causing a definitive increase in obesity. The American Academy of Pediatrics has raised the alarm on obesity. All of us as Pediatric Dentists are aware that at least 30% of the pediatric population is obese and 65% of adults are overweight. What a horrific statement in terms of physical fitness of our North American Society! The obesity "epidemic" will cause an insurmountable drain on future health care costs whether medical or dental.

Our dental profession is obviously well aware of the importance of diet and nutrition for oral health in children. The use of a caries assessment tool and dietary counseling has been an essential part of our respective pediatric practices for years and is integrated into the case presentation to a parent. I am finding that in many situations, I am talking to at least one or often two overweight and/or obese parents who also have a seriously overweight child. They have no concept of appropriate nutrition themselves. It is virtually impossible to change an entire family's lifestyle in the time frame allotted for any dental case presentation. Every day I have parents say "Doctor, my child has holes in the teeth because they are soft just like mine!" I feel my blood pressure mounting as I try to control my desire to say what I truly feel!

In addition, I find myself on what I sarcastically call the "bonus plan."

I will treat a young child one to two years of age with advanced early childhood caries under general anesthesia, often in hospital or in the in office surgical center, only to find that the child is referred back at 3 to 4 years of age with more advanced dental disease or tooth decay in the teeth that were not treated initially. Parental lifestyles including oral health care for the child have not changed in spite of my best attempts! Even with the time, cost, and yes possible potential risks of the sedation or anesthesia, I often will have the younger sibling referred into my Pediatric practice from the same family for treatment of advanced dental disease. Once again, the parents have not changed in their attitude about general or oral health care.

Type II Diabetes and cardiac problems that used to be an adult phenomenon are becoming evermore prevalent in children. How are we as Pediatric Dentists to deal with the nutritional challenges of our pediatric patients for the future? An entire paradigm shift has to take place in our society that we, the dental profession can support, but cannot initiate where essential drastic changes to lifestyles are required. As Pediatric Dentists and health care providers, we have an obligation to ensure that we are physically fit. The rhetorical question exists, "how can we, as professionals, advise our parents on sound diet and nutrition, when we as professionals do not reflect an appropriate image of physical fitness ourselves?" In addition, governments at all levels, federal, state and municipal, must become involved as a cohesive unit to reverse the "tsunami" of malnutrition.

More education needs to take place, both in the news media as well as through family counseling on the value of sound nutrition. As individual practitioners, we must continue to work with family physicians and pediatricians in our respective communities. While the AAPD continues to advocate on behalf of oral health care for children, this organization alone cannot achieve the essential or crucial changes that must take place in society. The Nutrition Symposium made it clear that one can go to McDonald's and get a "Big Mac and Fries" at about 20% of the costs of going to a grocery store and purchasing appropriate nutritional foods. The corporate world must accept more responsibility and become involved. The CEO's of companies, board members and stock holders need to be educated on the importance of sound nutrition.

In terms of Pediatric Dentistry, the symposium in Chicago suggested utilization of a nutritionist as part of the preventive dental regimen in private practice. While this may be an excellent suggestion, such an individual working in large pediatric practices will still have, in my opinion, minimal to low success in changing lifestyles of parents and children until society is ready to accept responsibility and change. I have been an optimist my entire life due to my personality. However, I must admit I am very pessimistic in terms of the future success of Anticipatory Guidance until our society undergoes a huge and dramatic shift and changes its attitude towards nutrition and places a much greater emphasis on its importance in terms of overall health and well being.

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