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Thirteen years ago, Surgeon General David Satcher released *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General*. The paper was the 51st Surgeon General report issued since 1964, when Luther Terry issued his landmark report on tobacco and health.

The report basically helped change the public's perception of the importance of trips to the dentist. It was one thing to lose your teeth...and something else again to lose quality of life or even your life itself, for the lack of an oral exam and some digital x-rays.

The leader of Oral Health in America was my friend and former USC School of Dentistry Dean (August 2000-December 2008), Dr. Harold Slavkin. Back in May of 2000, Slavkin was the director of a federal health agency, the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR). When Oral Health in America was released, only 15% of the U.S. population knew that they'd ever had an oral cancer exam during a dental visit. Not long after the report, researchers released findings revealing possible links of periodontal disease to heart disease, diabetes, and low weight premature births. To paraphrase Dr. Slavkin, it was clear dentistry needed to know more about medicine and medicine needed to know more about dentistry.

Today, dentistry has evolved as an effective preventive discipline. And what's really exciting is the profession's chance to make more of a general health difference for others every day.

Twenty million Americans are treated for Obstructive Sleep Apnea (that's one in five adults); possibly another 20 million cases remain undiagnosed. On average, folks who do not manage Obstructive Sleep Apnea lose eight years of life expectancy. Your dentist could help save your life.

Q. "Doc, so what're all these new questions about; you never asked me if I snored before? What is sleep apnea?"

Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA) is a condition in which the airway becomes restricted; a blockage behind the tongue and soft palate effectively stops breathing during sleep. Only around 25% of physicians screen for OSA and there are numerous signs and symptoms that dentists can see during an exam or ask about on a screening questionnaire. Some of

the indicators are snoring, daytime drowsiness, dry mouth, morning headaches, jaw and facial pain, teeth clenching and grinding, and even narrow dental arches and/or excessive overbites.

Q. "What can happen to me if I don't manage my OSA?"

Folks with OSA are prone to heart disease, type II diabetes, hypertension, impotence, depression, weight gain, and acid reflux. 75% of stroke victims also have OSA. Drivers suffering from OSA are seven times more likely to have automobile accidents. Again, untreated OSA can reduce life expectancy by some eight years.

Q. "So what do I do if the screening shows I'm at risk?"

I'd recommend doing a sleep study at a local sleep clinic and securing a sleep physician's diagnosis. In Pasadena, the Huntington Memorial Hospital does a great job. Another alternative (that's much less expensive for the uninsured) is a home sleep test. You can set up a home test with your dentist and get a diagnosis from a sleep physician. Light and moderate OSA can be treated with oral appliances that reposition the lower jaw and tongue and also open up nasal breathing, decreasing upper respiratory resistance. Severe OSA is best treated with the Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) apparatus. The oral appliances can also help patients who can't tolerate the CPAP. What used to be some rumbling nocturnal call of the wild is way more than that; it's really the sound of someone desperately trying to breathe.

Q. "What about sleep apnea in children; I can actually hear my son grinding his teeth every night?"

What a great question! When children audibly grind their teeth at night, it's not because their boss is a jerk; the grinding actually helps open up the ear canals and relieve pressure building up in the airway. Most often, allergies cause the immune system response that generates large tonsils and adenoids blocking the airway. Without proper care, adaptive swallowing and ineffective breathing can impact oral, facial, and cognitive development as well as growth and development in general. When we screen children at local schools, it's obvious allergies and malocclusions in little kids are epidemic. It's NEVER too early for a first visit or an orthodontic consult. And one more bit of advice: if an orthodontist suggests removing any of your child's adult teeth, get a second opinion.

Ask your dentist about sleep apnea.

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