

## UNIT NO. I

## THE GENERAL MEDICAL PRACTITIONER – AN ALLY IN ORAL HEALTH PROMOTION

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**ABSTRACT**

**More people visit their general medical practitioners each year than any other health professional. As oral health is part and parcel of an individual's general health and well-being, the general medical practitioner is well positioned to identify early signs of oral conditions and alert their patients to seek further follow-up with their dental practitioners.**

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**INTRODUCTION**

General medical practitioners provide comprehensive and holistic preventive, curative and rehabilitative health care for patients in the community. More people visit their general medical practitioners each year than any other health care professional. They are therefore well positioned to promote health, anticipate health needs and offer opportunistic prevention by proactively targeting high-risk individuals who may not be fully aware of the need for follow-up care and management.

Oral health is part and parcel of an individual's general health and wellbeing. An alliance should therefore be forged with the general medical practitioner to empower them to identify early signs of oral conditions and alert their patients to seek further follow-up with their dental practitioners. For example, when a doctor performs a routine tonsil examination, a quick glance at the rest of the mouth for signs of oral disease can help the patient a long way. Early referral to a dental surgeon or an oral health therapist (e.g. dental hygienist; dental therapist) can enhance the patient's overall quality of life.

It must be emphasised that the role of the general medical practitioner is to recognise and identify the less than optimal states of oral health and refer the patient to a dental surgeon or oral health therapist for further management. The general medical practitioner should not be expected to dispense oral hygiene instructions but if he/she does so, that will be a real bonus for the patient!

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The general medical practitioner's role in oral health promotion is increasingly being well accepted in other countries such as Australia (RACGP, 2006)<sup>1</sup> and in the United States (Douglass, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Locally, the medical and dental fraternities can also work closely and synergistically to advance the state of oral health of the population.

**OVERVIEW OF THE ORAL HEALTH IN PRIMARY CARE SKILLS COURSE**

This Family Practice Skills Course aims to provide general medical practitioners with an overview of common oral health conditions which may be experienced across the lifespan of an individual. Such an overview will empower medical practitioners to opportunistically recognise and identify similar conditions in their patients during the medical consultation. In turn, this can facilitate a timely dental referral for the patient. A summary of the content of the course is as follows:

- **Unit 1 – The General Medical Practitioner – An Ally in Oral Health Promotion**

This unit highlights the fact that as more people visit their general medical practitioners each year than any other health professional, this first point of contact for patients can facilitate preventive dental care through timely referrals to our dental colleagues.

- **Unit 2 – Quick Oral Health Facts about the Young**

This unit highlights the key developmental dental milestones of children, the importance of the primary dentition and common oral conditions which may be experienced in the early years of life.

- **Unit 3 – Common Dental Conditions in Adults**

This unit highlights the two common oral problems in the adult population namely, dental caries and periodontal disease. The Common Risk Factor Approach in preventing these conditions is also described.

- **Unit 4 – Ageing and its Influence on the Oral Environment**

This unit examines the physiological influences of ageing on the oral cavity as predisposing factors to dental problems in the elderly.

- **Unit 5 and 6 – Helping the Silver Generation Smile**

These two units raise awareness of common dental conditions associated with the elderly and highlights medical conditions which may have an impact on their oral health. Unit 5 focuses on the common dental conditions among the elderly namely, periodontal (gum) disease, xerostomia, caries, teeth loss and prosthesis. Unit 6 elaborates on the common medical conditions associated dental problems namely, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, medications resulting in xerostomia, effects of radiation therapy, oral cancer, and antibiotic prophylaxis guidelines, and osteonecrosis of the jaws as an effect of bisphosphonates.

#### REFERENCES

1. RACGP. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners' position on the importance of preventive health care and health promotion, and the general practitioner's role in prevention, health care and health promotion. RACGP National Standing Committee – Quality Care. 2006. URL: [www.racgp.org.au/policy/Role\\_of\\_gp\\_in\\_prevention\\_and\\_health\\_promotion.pdf](http://www.racgp.org.au/policy/Role_of_gp_in_prevention_and_health_promotion.pdf)
2. Douglass AB, Maier R. Promoting oral health: the family physician's role. Am Fam Physician. 2008 Oct 1;78(7):814-5.

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#### LEARNING POINTS

- **Oral health is part and parcel of an individual's general health and well-being.**
  - **The role of the general medical practitioner is to recognise and identify the less than optimal dental condition and refer the patient to a dental surgeon or dental hygienist for further management.**
  - **Early referral to a dental surgeon or dental hygienist can add many more years of oral health to the patient.**
  - **The general medical practitioner's role in oral health promotion is increasingly being more well established.**
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