

The gender divide

Just what are the differences between men and women who present in the dental chair – and what do they mean for you? **Peter Baker** investigates

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man – even in a state of poor health – is seldom in want of a doctor. This is, of course, a crude parody of the famous opening words of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, an account of manners and marriage in Georgian England and not men’s use of primary care services in the 21st century. But it is, nonetheless, true that there is now greater awareness of men’s sub-optimal use of general practice; however, there has been, as yet, virtually no discussion of men’s use of community dental services. This is a significant omission because there are clear and important gender differences in oral health and the use of dental services. Men are far less likely than women to attend for a routine check-up, to brush their teeth twice a day, to replace their toothbrush appropriately or to use interdental aids. They are also more likely to consume alcohol at hazardous levels, to smoke (although the gap between men and women has narrowed in recent years) and to have a poorer diet.

Much more likely...

Men generally consume more sugar than women. Men are more likely than women to experience dental trauma, most likely as a result of sports injuries, road traffic accidents or inter-personal violence. While men’s risk of caries is lower than women’s, largely for biological reasons, they are far more likely to develop destructive periodontitis or an oral cancer. There were around 7,600 new cases of oral cancer in the UK in 2013, according to Cancer

Research UK, with most cases occurring in the tonsils. 1 in 75 men and 1 in 150 women will be diagnosed with oral cancer during their lifetime and the incidence is expected to double between 1995 and 2025. Around two-thirds of oral cancer deaths are in men. Smoking and alcohol have been the main causes of oral cancer but Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection has become a much more significant factor over the past 30 years as a result of transmission during oral sex.

Pay attention

Periodontal disease is associated with a range of systemic diseases, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes. It has also been linked to erectile dysfunction and cognitive impairment and dementia in men. The problematic nature of men’s oral health suggests that the dental profession should pay greater attention to their needs in particular take steps to improve prevention and early diagnosis. A range of initiatives would help, some from the profession as a whole and some from individual dental practices. The following are suggestions that derive from the European Men’s Health Forum’s ongoing study of men’s use of all primary care services, including dentistry:

- Because men respond differently to health information, ‘male-friendly’ campaigns are needed to encourage better self-care and regular check-ups. Male-targeted imagery, humour and the use of mechanical metaphors have been used successfully in other health information developed for men and the lessons learned could be adapted for oral health;
- Men’s oral health should be given

a higher profile in public health campaigns on smoking, alcohol, heart disease and cancer;

- Men in full-time work are known to find it harder to use primary care services in general. Offering appointments outside of ‘normal hours’ would make it easier for this group, and of course women in full-time work, to attend;
- Having to make appointments by telephone during normal hours deters many men from seeing GPs and the same may well be true for dentists. Online booking systems could help to reduce this barrier;
- Going to where men are (workplaces, social and sports venues, faith organisations, etc.) is known to be effective in engaging men in health. Dentists could spend time out of their clinics giving educational talks and carrying out simple check-ups. The Boundaries for Life health initiative has been offering health checks (including oral health) to spectators at cricket matches for several years;
- Dental practitioners should ‘make every contact count’ with men. When a man is in the chair, especially if he is an irregular attender, the opportunity should be taken to discuss his lifestyle and to make sure he is aware of the key symptoms of oral disease;
- Make the case for boys as well as girls to be included in the national HPV vaccination programme to improve oral cancer prevention. Dental practitioners can, for example, lobby their local MPs about this as well as encourage their professional associations to campaign more vigorously. The British Dental Association, the British Dental Health Foundation, the British Association



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of Dental Therapists, and the British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy are among the oral health organisations already supporting HPV vaccination for boys;

- Policy on dental and oral health should take account of gender differences;
- More research is needed to understand men's attitudes and behaviours in respect of oral health and their use of dental services. This could in turn enable the development of better targeted dental services.

Taking greater account of the specific needs of both men and women is becoming more widely accepted in health policy and practice generally. The dental profession should do the same to help achieve optimal oral health for all.

Vive le différence

- Women are more likely than men to clean their teeth twice a day or more (82% v 67%) and to use floss (26% v 16%).
- Men are less likely than women to have tried to make an NHS dental appointment in the last three years (54% v 62%).
- Dentate men are less likely than women to have very healthy periodontal tissues (14% v 19%).
- A greater proportion of men than women have obvious decay (dental caries on crowns or roots) (34% v 28%).
- Men are more likely to have plaque than women (71% v 61%) and they also have a higher proportion of affected teeth (27% v 20%).
- Men are more likely than women to have coronal decay (32% v 26%).
- Men are more likely than women to have some gingival bleeding (56% v 52%).

All data from The 2009 Adult Dental Health Survey for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

