

FOCUS ON: Prosthodontics

Lorin F. Berland, DDS, discusses a patient population that has not taken advantage of new denture technology, urging colleagues to educate this market.

Q: Dentistry has certainly gotten a lot of positive media attention in recent years. In spite of all that, do you think there's something missing?

A: Yes, I do. While publicity on the latest trends and products in dentistry—whitening, veneers, implants, and the connection between oral and general health—have brought even more people seeking our help, unfortunately, there is one large segment of the population, all over the world, that has been largely ignored: those people with no teeth, many of whom have dentures that are old, ill-fitting, bacteria-ridden, and no longer look or work as well as they should. Recent innovations, including surgical techniques, stronger yet more biocompatible bases, and whiter, more functional denture teeth are both relevant and important to the edentulous population; they just don't know about it.

Q: Are you saying there are denture patients out there who need new dentures?

A: Yes! Take a walk through the dental aisle in any pharmacy and you'll see a massive display of denture adhesives and cleansers. These products, good as they may be, will not really make dentures tighter and/or whiter. But, for whatever reason, the people who need care the most just don't come in for routine check-ups, don't call to get their teeth cleaned, and, by their very nature, don't have toothaches; they don't go to the dentist because they go to the drug store, making them effectively dental "cripples." Yet, new advancements in denture and implant technology can make life better for every denture wearer out there.

Recent studies have shown that disinfection solutions cannot eliminate micro-organisms like *Escherichia coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Candida albicans* from old, porous dentures. Only new dentures can eliminate these bugs. In fact, new dentures and/or definitely implants will significantly improve the overall physical and emotional well-being of almost any denture wearer. An attractive denture that improves function and aesthetics has always been one of the greatest services a dentist can provide. The cosmetic principles of smile design relating to tooth size, shape, and facial proportions have always been an integral part of full-denture prosthodontics. Increasing vertical dimension, filling out "sunken" cheeks, and reducing wrinkles can improve a patient's overall appearance and confidence. This creates a fuller, younger look with a bigger, better, and whiter smile.

Q: Is the edentulous population growing or shrinking?

A: It's definitely growing. In a 2001 survey, there were an estimated 31.8 million



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Americans that were completely edentulous in at least one arch, and those numbers are increasing. In 2010, that number was 38.6 million Americans. According to *Oral Health-Healthy People 2010: Objective for Improving Health*, 26% of the US population between the ages of 65 years and 74 years are completely edentulous.

Q: Why aren't those people seeing a dentist?

A: Maybe they just don't think a dentist can help them and they have lost hope. Maybe they think they can't afford it, and they could be a bit fearful. It's quite possible that the last time these people saw a dentist was when they had a tooth (or teeth) pulled; not a pleasant experience that anyone would want to relive. But you know what? There is hope.

Many people have dentures that are 10, 15, and 20 years old, and the numbers of these patients with older dentures are increasing. Since dentures should be replaced on an average of every 3 to 5 years, that is a lot of untapped potential patients! At least one half of all denture wearers have problems with their dentures. They don't fit properly, aren't functional, or probably even hindering the patient's physical health and appearance. This is obviously a great opportunity to improve the lives of many people.

Beyond new dentures and all that they entail, including better aesthetics, hygiene, diet, and looks, we can now offer dental implants—a true modern miracle, enabling these people to lead even fuller, healthier and better lives in every way.

Q: Besides new dentures and dental implants, are there other reasons for denture wearers to see their dentist?

A: People with dental implants require more frequent cleanings and checkups. The oral tissues should be inspected for any changes. The dentures should be professionally cleaned and disinfected. Proper fit and the need for a relin or re-base should be considered. Think about this: *If denture patients smoke or drink, their chances of having oral cancer significantly increase.* Recent studies show that these people would be best served by seeing a dentist for an oral cancer exam and screening, as well as for new dentures.

This is our target denture market. We should try to reach and educate them about their choices the *modern* way. After all, these potential patients need our services the most.

Q: How do we reach this untapped market?

A: That's a great question, especially since we are obviously not doing a good job right now. I don't advertise, but I know dentists and dental corporations are having success through extensive marketing efforts. They are increasing public awareness of better, more cosmetic dentures and the miracle of dental implants, and as a result, we all benefit. I think that it's imperative that dentists promote their denture and implant services on their Web sites, as well as in their advertising. Did you know the fastest growing online audience is people aged 50 and older? (A fact cited by the *Dallas Morning News* on October 12, 2009.) This is our target audience. People can't and won't get the help they need if they don't know it's available and if they attach any sort of social stigma to it. Dentists who take the time to publicly explore the steps involved will help educate and inform patients as to the choices they have, and increase acceptance of denture and implants among the edentulous population.

I would also like to see denture and dental implant manufacturers more involved in reaching out to the edentulous public, as well as to dentists. Outreach campaigns in both local and online communities will boost awareness of the issues associated with older or ill-fitting dentures, and prompt those patients who need to have an examination to go see their dentists.

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