



Dental Offices Take Steps to Address Tobacco Use Among Patients

“As we ask our patients about tobacco use, and offer resources and support to encourage a quit attempt, we can and will save lives.”

-Dr. Ryan R. Manke, DDS
Lakeridge Dental, Detroit Lakes



Dental hygienists and dental offices are seldom thought of as settings where life and death decisions are made. But every time a dental hygienist or dentist asks a patient about his or her tobacco use, he or she is taking the first step towards a potential life-saving moment.

Tobacco use can lead to oral health problems, and thus is a concern of dental professionals. But as tobacco use can also lead to lung cancer and other lung-related diseases, a dental practice that systematically asks every patient about tobacco use, and then is primed to offer assistance towards a quit attempt, is making the most of the opportunity to impact a patient's health.

The evidence-based strategy to address tobacco use in any health care setting is to follow a framework known as the 5As (Ask, Advise, Assess, Assist, Arrange). This means that every patient is to be asked or screened about tobacco status, advised of risks of tobacco use and benefits of quitting, assessed for readiness to change, assisted with a quit attempt including referral to cessation resources, and arranging for follow-up about the quit attempt.

Unfortunately, many dental offices do not ask about tobacco status, nor refer to community resources to assist a patient before and during a quit attempt. PartnerSHIP 4 Health, the local public health arm of the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) in Becker, Clay, Otter Tail, and Wilkin counties, contacted the statewide quit line program, Call it Quits and discovered that only 3 of 41 dental offices, representing 67 dentists, were registered as fax referral sites for the Call it Quits telephonic tobacco cessation counseling and resources.

A plan was set in motion to compile resources that could be shared with dentists and dental offices to support the integration of the Quit Line into dental practice. These information packets were then mailed to each dentist in the four counties. Brenda Woytassak, LPN, and former PartnerSHIP 4 Health staff member, agreed to make telephone and site visits to each of the dental offices in the four counties and encourage them to continue or begin screening for tobacco use and then fax referring interested patients to the Quit Line.

During initial phone contact with each dental office, Woytassak discovered that the administrative staff was generally not familiar at all with the dental packet contents, as the packets were sent to the dentists and/or had been received weeks prior to the phone contact. So Woytassak spent time offering a quick review of PartnerSHIP 4 Health and the dental outreach project. Dental clinics and providers were encouraged to register as official sites for the fax referral program, integrate the program into visit flow, display Call it Quits posters and brochures, and utilize motivational interviewing techniques to facilitate the referral process. Approximately 27 of the dental offices agreed to a site visit and further information and of those, 21 did register as a fax referral site for tobacco cessation.

According to Dr. Ryan R. Manke, DDS of Lakeridge Dental in Detroit Lakes, "I recall one of my dental professors telling us that in our work as dentists we would not often save a life. However, as we ask our patients about tobacco use, and offer resources and support to encourage a quit attempt, we can and will save lives."

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