

More on Holistic Dentistry

The following is adapted from articles by B. Lawrence Bennett, DDS, as published in the Billings Gazette, April 2007:

What Is Holistic Dentistry?

The meaning of *holistic dentistry* varies depending on the philosophy of each holistic dentist. For Dr. Bennett, the term means that oral health and the health of the whole body are intimately related. The health of the body can affect the health of the mouth. The health of the mouth can affect the health of the body.

Research increasingly shows that disease in any one system of the body causes physiologic and metabolic stress in other systems. The interconnections among the various body systems are central to the proper metabolic function and physical health of the body.

Some of the interconnections we know about, but do not fully understand, include:

- Adrenaline, the hormone epinephrine, and cortisol are produced by the adrenal gland during stressful life experiences. Stress has been found to be a contributing factor to both heart disease and a dental disease known as temporomandibular disorder (TMD/TMJ). Stress also affects the digestive system by suppressing the digestive process and the central nervous system by creating changes in sleep patterns and psychological and physiological responses.
- The dental disease known as periodontal disease (which is extremely common in adults) has been shown to be predictive of heart disease.
- Diabetes mellitus, a disease caused by what is now believed to be an autoimmune response of the immune system, results in decreased insulin production in the pancreas AND potentially leads to periodontal disease and cardiovascular disease.
- Evidence suggests that that poor oral health can more than double the risk of heart attack.

As practiced by Dr. Bennett, holistic dentistry strives to understand and treat these interconnections.

Recently, as medical technology and pharmaceutical management of disease have become more complicated, doctors have become more specialized and more and more reliant on new drugs. Medical and dental problems have been treated more and more as localized problems, out of context of the body as a whole. The holistic dentist takes a whole-system approach.

Plaque & Decay

Consider the common dental problem of tooth decay.

Both the holistic dentist and the conventional dentist believe that tooth decay is caused by dental plaque. Both types of dentists repair the decay with fillings and advise patients to more effectively and regularly clean the plaque from their teeth.

But the holistic dentist goes one step further, addressing the acidic salivary secretions that accelerate plaque growth and increase tooth decay and periodontal disease. Acidic saliva – an indicator that body chemistry is out of balance – is related to a systemic acid tendency in the gut and the intercellular fluids of the body associated with a diet high in refined carbohydrates. It can alter the digestive process by inhibiting the action of the enzyme amylase, which needs an alkaline environment. To restore enzymatic action, the patient must make dietary changes.

More to Consider

Conventional and holistic dentists differ as well in their approaches to:

- *The use of mercury in dental silver amalgam.* Holistic dentists believe that mercury in fillings can be a significant health hazard.
- *Dental materials compatibility.* Dr. Bennett can order blood tests to determine the biocompatibility of each patient to a variety of dental materials. Many patients have allergic or negative reactions to certain materials.
- *The use of dissimilar metals.* Dr. Bennett avoids the use of metal dental materials if possible. Dissimilar metals in an electrolyte (saliva) cause a phenomena called *galvanism*, which can result in harmful low-level electrical flow between metal restorations.
- *Periodontal (gum) and heart disease.* Periodontal disease (also known as gum disease or pyorrhea) and heart disease are both associated with chronic inflammation, connective tissue breakdown, and excess free calcium in the body. Dr. Bennett investigates these connections and treats patients accordingly.
- *Use of antibiotics.* Bacterial resistance to antibiotics is increasing. Dr. Bennett is especially concerned about the routine use of antibiotics in dental treatment. He only uses antibiotics in the presence of severe infections, and looks for natural alternatives to antibiotic therapy in efforts to control less severe bacterial infections.
- *TMJ/TMD.* Dr. Bennett recognizes that systemic stress plays an important role in TMJ/TMD, a degenerative disease of the jaw joint characterized by bruxism, headaches, and facial pain.

- *Malocclusions* (“*Bad Bites*”). Dr. Bennett recognizes that worn, cracked, or broken teeth indicate a poor skeletal relationship between the cranial base and the mandible. Correcting this relationship is important to preventing the need for crowns, root canals, bridgework, implants, and dentures.