Perceived myths about oral health in India

Sir,

I would like to congratulate Singh for highlighting a very important issue regarding myths among the rural population in a Lucknow district, concluding marked ignorance and lack of scientific dental awareness among older, less educated and female subjects.[1] Through the years, dentists have faced many myths and other unproven beliefs, which passed from one generation to another. In today’s evolving environment of evidence-based medicine and dentistry, these anecdotal observations do not withstand scrutiny. Especially, a developing country like India faces many challenges in rendering oral health needs. Myths are part and parcel of everyone’s lives. However, one has to be aware of some of the myths that are floating around on issues related to health that includes dental health because it could result in dangerous consequences if followed without understanding the principles behind it. There are many dental myths, some are child related, some of them adult related and the rest superstitious.[2]

As systems are becoming more complex and people’s expectations of health-care are rising dramatically, understanding the myths and misconceptions about oral diseases is important in providing excellent care and health education to both patients and healthy individuals. As the high prevalence of these myths will prevent such population from obtaining proper dental care even if it could be made available to them.[1]

The most widely believed myths about oral health in India are milk teeth need not be cared for because they last only for a few years and these teeth will anyway be replaced by permanent teeth.[2] This is not entirely true as early loss of milk teeth will interfere with chewing and affect the child’s nutrition, leads to drifting of the adjacent teeth and closure of some of the space that is required for the succeeding permanent teeth to erupt into. Such a loss of space will cause the permanent teeth to erupt in irregular position and result in crowding.[3] Therefore, milk teeth need to be cared for as much as permanent teeth. Hence, it is advisable to start the habit of cleaning the infant’s teeth soon after they appear in the mouth. In fact, it is advised to clean baby’s gum pads everyday by gentle massage even before the teeth erupt.[4] As cut brinjals will change their color to black, some people believe that staining of the teeth is because of eating brinjal by the same principle. Another common belief is that removal of upper teeth affects vision.[1,2] and even though, many subjects know that root canal treatment as an alternative to extraction, they still have a fear that it is always painful.[2]

Others being, an artificial set of teeth or complete denture that is made once is forever, Professional cleaning/scaling/removal of tartar loosens the teeth. Charcoal, salt, rice husk, tobacco, etc., in powder form is better than toothpaste in cleaning and presence of teeth at birth is harmful to grandparents, which all are incorrect.[2]

These myths can be prevalent in a population due to a variety of reasons like poor education,[1] cultural beliefs and social misconceptions. It is difficult to break this chain as it is deep seated in the society and understanding them becomes essential to provide a good care. Hence, importance should be given for public health awareness regarding myths about oral health at the individual as well as community level.

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