**Current standards of effective oral care provision are unacceptable**

The standard of oral care is a key indicator of the quality of care given, but more research and guidance on best practice is needed, says Clare Clarke

The effective provision of oral care is not a highly technical procedure, nor is it expensive in terms of resources. But evidence suggests that the importance of providing effective oral care is often not fully understood and can even be neglected.

This is unacceptable and may have a considerable impact on the quality of care delivered and how this is perceived by patients and carers. If an aspect of care is considered vital, it is reasonable to assume that without that care patients will be harmed.

Effective oral care should be considered a priority and of equal importance when compared with other highly technical interventions. The Practice Review article (see p19) outlines the importance of patients’ oral health and reviews the evidence and best practice.

Recent media attention has focused on the poor quality or neglect of essential elements of care in certain hospitals or care settings. Patients’ mouths are highly visible and failure to provide oral care is instantly apparent. For example, dry cracked lips, a coated tongue and halitosis all indicate a lack of care, attention and a disregard for patient comfort.

The perceptions of relatives and carers regarding the quality of nursing care will often be influenced by or based on such indicators. Therefore, effective oral care can show caring and compassion.

Nurses are ultimately accountable and have a duty of care to minimise risk and potential harm to patients and promote well-being. In oral care, this involves carrying out and documenting a full oral hygiene assessment, preferably using a valid assessment tool, and planning care taking the individual patient’s needs into account. It also involves ensuring effective evidence-based preventative strategies and proactive interventions. This might involve referral for dental treatment.

If oral care is delegated to an unregistered practitioner, nurses remain accountable and must ensure that care has been given in an appropriate manner. It is therefore vital that all healthcare workers understand the importance of effective oral care and the harm caused by failure to provide it.

A limited number of studies have shown that education and training can raise awareness of the importance of oral hygiene. To perform a clinical skill competently, knowledge and understanding of the underpinning theory is essential. Ongoing oral care education is therefore vital to raise awareness of risk factors and the importance of preventative strategies and effective interventions.

To ensure effective care, it is vital that knowledge about an individual’s condition, circumstances and preferences are integrated with research evidence and clinical expertise (Cullum et al, 2008). Previously, many aspects of care were based on ritual and intuition, and oral care is no exception.

Evidence is limited and there is still some uncertainty about what best practice actually is, but studies have shown that many preventative oral hygiene interventions are effective, for example saliva substitutes and stimulants, and denture care. The development of evidence-based guidelines would help to identify best practice and ensure consistency of care.

Effective oral care is essential and a key quality indicator. Although research in this area is limited, it is vital that the findings of high-quality research are integrated into decision-making. Awareness must continue to be raised through research, publication, education and training to highlight the importance of this essential element of care.

**‘Dry cracked lips, a coated tongue and halitosis all indicate a lack of care and a disregard for patients’**

**REFERENCE**