November 1984

A co-ordinated approach to dental health education

D. Gordon MacDonald

Senior HEO

Huntingdon Health Education Unit

This article describes how health education co-ordinators and general dental practitioners met for a Study Day organised by the Huntingdon Health Education Unit. The aim was to encourage these two groups of professionals to work in closer liaison in educating children about tooth decay and gum disease, and how they can be avoided.

Dental health education messages delivered in the past have been incomprehensible, unco-ordinated or indeed contradictory. This has led to a degree of cynicism within the public mind, and even a disbelief in dental advice. A commonlyquoted example of the way in which dental health messages have confused and confounded public knowledge can be seen by the fact that many teenagers (16-20 year olds) realise that a high sugar diet might cause tooth decay, but still believe that tooth brushing reduces decay. (The 16-20 study: Dental Health Study. University of Cambridge.) They do not equate a reduction in sugar with healthier teeth. There is no reason to question the assumption that this belief is maintained into adult life.

There are conflicting beliefs and attitudes also to fluoridation, whether applied through topical brushing, tablet ingestion. or the mains water supply. Public dental health knowledge has been further confused by the professional advice given on 'correct' tooth brushing, and the effect diet, particularly refined carbohydrates, has on tooth decay.

A combination of factors, then, have contributed in the past to the fact that in

terms of dental health Britain fares poorly in the international league table. Contradictory messages and even poor professional training in preventive dental health advice have led to confusion and noncompliance.

A Study Day

In an attempt to provide professionals with a sounder knowledge of current dental health education practice, a Study Day was arranged by the Huntingdon Health Education Unit on the 28th April 1984. After a number of personal visits to general dental practitioners, community dental officers, and school teachers, invitations were sent out to interested parties. It was hoped that by making the day interdisciplinary a greater understanding of each other's role and approach might emerge. Speakers were recruited, with the active support of Michael Craft and the Dental Health Study at the University of Cambridge, to cover the two main strands of the day.

Firstly a dentist addressed the meeting on the concept and practice of dental health education within a surgery. This provided the dental practitioner with a rationale for dental health education

(only recently included within the curriculum of dental schools), and with practical tips on planning the move to prevention and education whilst at the same time keeping costs to a minimum.

The second strand concerned dental health education within the community generally, and particularly within the school. A biology teacher spoke of 'Natural Nashers' and how he has used it within the third-year biology curriculum. 'Natural Nashers' has been developed by the Dental Health Study and is designed for a 3rd-year science class. It not only attempts to increase the knowledge of the student in terms of causes of dental decay and gum disease, but also attempts to motivate 13-14-year-olds towards behavioural change by practising preventive measures through classroom activities and set 'homework' tasks. This conversion from an understanding of the aetiology of disease to a behavioural change resulting in disease prevention is notoriously difficult to achieve, but the 'Natural Nashers' pre- and post-test plaque accumulation and gingival inflammation scores seemed to indicate behaviour modification.1

The afternoon of the Study Day was given over to small-group discussion to allow both teachers and dentists an opportunity to explore issues with the respective speaker still further. This gave teachers an insight into how the lessons are planned, the amount of time needed. and the pupils' reaction to a 'Natural Nashers' programme. A final plenary session tried to draw the two main strands of the day together, and this involved the Health Education Unit and the District Dental Officer and his staff. A number of points emerged from the plenary session which are worth noting.

- 1. The day had been innovative and extremely worthwhile.
- 2. It brought together, for the first time in a study setting, teachers, dental practitioners, and dental officers from the Community Dental Service in the Huntingdon Health District.
- 3. Dental practitioners were made aware

- of the 'relative' ease with which a practice could be converted into providing preventive dental health education
- 4. Teachers were introduced to a variety of commercial dental health education packs, but for the first time, in this district, gained some insight into the 'Natural Nashers' programme.
- 5. All present agreed that they now had a better understanding of current issues in dental health education and of each other's role in attempting to convey dental health messages.

The Future

By bringing professionals involved in dental health education together, it was hoped to reduce the ambiguity in the dental health programme, so that a more co-ordinated programme with mutually reinforced messages and advice might eliminate public confusion. This can be facilitated if the community dental service and teachers work together to educate children about tooth decay and gum disease and how they can be avoided. To this end, the Health Education Council held a symposium for District Dental Officers in June 1984, which would, it was hoped, help to accelerate this cooperation process. Already, in Huntingdon Health District, one school has indicated its determination to use 'Natural Nashers' and to develop closer links with the school dental officer and local practitioners. This co-ordinated approach is the only way to tackle the most common disease in Britain.

Reference

1. Craft, H. & Croucher, R., Preventive dental health in adolescence: Results of a controlled field trial. Journal of the Royal Society of Health, 2, 48-56, 1979.

1th Related Benu. sion 10 is out... Health Relate aviour Questionnaire Version 1 ... Health Related Behaviour (ersion 10 is out... Health Relat haviour Questionnaire Version Bolated Behaviour