

THERE IS NO HEALTH WITHOUT GOOD ORAL HEALTH*

By Carol Van Aernam, RDH, BA

Dementia and oral care: It is difficult for persons with dementia to provide their own oral care. Many have severe dental needs such as dental decay and gum disease. Difficult behaviors could be the result of oral pain. They may not be able to tell us about the pain in their mouth.

Question: How does poor oral health and dental pain affect those with dementia?

Answer:

- It can affect their appearance and socializing with others.
- They may not be able to eat or have difficulty in swallowing.
- It can contribute to weight loss, dehydration and type of diet.
- Increases difficult behaviors.

Question: How can I provide oral care for individuals with difficult behaviors?

Answer:

- Always approach the person from the front and slowly move to the side.
- Identify yourself to the individual.
- Maintain eye contact and stand or sit at their level.
- Show the individual the toothbrush and tell them what you are going to do.
- Smile and be gentle.
- Be patient, reassuring and try to enlist the person's participation by giving them a toothbrush.
- Always try to provide oral care later if they refuse.

**Surgeon General, Report on Oral Health, 2000*

All health and long term service and support (LTSS) professionals/caregivers are expected to work within their Scopes of Practice or job descriptions as defined by the State or employer. Family caregivers are encouraged to contact the dental or medical provider before making changes to a loved one's care plan.

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Meet Carol, a Registered Dental Hygienist and a Mouth Care Matters consultant and instructor.

Carol Van Aernam is a Mouth Care Matters (MCM) instructor and consultant for Iowa CareGivers. She plays a key role in planning, promoting, and teaching MCM. Carol worked in private dental practice for several years and 34 years for the Veterans Administration and Central Iowa Health Care System as a dental hygienist. She specializes in geriatric care and has presented programs at the local and national levels to those who work in direct care, dietitians, dentists, dental hygienists, and other caregivers. In addition, Carol served as an adjunct instructor for Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) and the University of Iowa.

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