

Dentaid launches its campaign to combat the practice of Infant Oral Mutilation

Oral health charity Dentaid has launched a new campaign designed to end the barbaric practice of Infant Oral Mutilation (IOM), the digging out of an infant's healthy baby teeth. The aim of this new Dentaid initiative is to significantly increase the awareness of Infant Oral Mutilation in the Western dental profession and to generate greater understanding of the practice in IOM affected countries.

The reason that the teeth are removed is the mistaken belief that the soft white buds of the new teeth are actually worms in the mouth of the infant. These 'mouth worms' are believed to be parasitic and fever causing so that when a child is presented with an illness these are taken to be the cause. A primitive technique is usually employed to gouge out the baby teeth involving un – sterile knives, bicycle spokes, finger nails or other bizarre and inappropriate instruments.

The practice is often carried out by village healers for a fee. It is also performed by parents, community elders and even midwives. The tragedy is that they believe that they are helping to cure the child.

The reality is that Infant Oral Mutilation causes severe pain, serious oral health complications and, not infrequently, death. Infants often suffer from future facial disfigurement, damage to the gums and the permanent teeth following the removal of their health deciduous teeth. In one region of Uganda infant deaths due to septicaemia and other infectious diseases, following IOM, are reported to be second only to malaria as a cause of infant mortality.

One of the most serious problems of IOM is that the misdiagnosis of 'mouth worms' as the cause of the illness means missing the real reason that the child is ill. Many illnesses that could be cured if caught early on may well cause much more serious illness or potentially death if left undiagnosed and untreated.

Infant Oral Mutilation is a custom that passes between communities and tribes. More recently there have been several reports of children being presented in Western Clinics, raising the question of this practice potentially occurring in migrant populations.

Dentaid has adopted combating the practice of IOM as one of its major priorities over the next few years. The charity has now embarked on a process intended to bring the practice of IOM to the forefront of public awareness and end the needless pain and suffering that it causes. To this end Dentaid has created an IOM action group to focus on implementing a strategy to combat this practice.

This action group consists of a number of experts in community and dental public health, dentistry and international development. This group has been working to build a solid foundation of knowledge and expertise from which Dentaid could launch this campaign. This consisted of a comprehensive research and literature review carried out by Dr Jonathan Gollings and Rosemary Longhurst. Next was a phase of consultation and networking with relevant bodies and experts in the field. Finally there has been the implementation of an action plan, devised predominantly by Thelma Edwards, of how best to begin to combat the practice of IOM.

Dentaid has now devised a trial community based approach to educate people about the practice of IOM in the countries in which it takes place. A group of volunteers headed by Barbara Koffman, in association with Christian Relief Uganda, went out to Uganda in September 2008. They carried out dental screenings, basic treatments and training. They also conducted interviews with health workers, community leaders and parents to gather anecdotal evidence of how IOM is perceived in Uganda. This information will assist in the strategic development of the Dentaid project to combat IOM.

Incredibly IOM is hardly recognised let alone strategically or significantly combated as any kind of major health issue. Many western dentists have not even heard of it. Dentaid seeks to remedy this through this campaign to raise the profile of, and eventually, eradicate the practice of Infant Oral Mutilation.

If you are interested in getting involved with this campaign please contact Nicky Triance on 01794 325146 or e – mail nicky@dentaid.org. Detailed information can also be found at www.dentaid.org.