

Healthcare • Focus on total patient care approach to dental health

I refer to Professor Teo Yik Ying's Opinion piece "Say aah! Why is Singapore neglecting dental health?" (Nov 20).

Neglecting dental health is a significant problem which goes beyond the oral and facial regions.

The World Health Organisation identifies it as a key indicator of overall health, well-being and quality of life.

Take this simple but all too

common example – tooth decay and/or gum disease can lead to tooth loss, which can lead to chewing difficulties, poor diet and nutrition, low self-esteem, difficulty speaking and a lower quality of life.

Prof Teo suggests sound solutions in which, importantly, all health professionals, government, industry and community can contribute.

Good health literacy lets people

access, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health – for example, through preventive care.

Inter-professional collaborative health practice, implemented recently at NUS as a common curriculum among health professional students, helps with this, particularly as dental disease has common risk factors with other diseases such as

obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Such courses ensure that health professionals speak a common language, underpinned by evidence, that has relevance to all health disciplines and, importantly, the community and patient.

It is time for us to step out of our respective disciplinary "tribes" and focus on a total patient care approach.

Incentivising subsidised dental care is a great idea, and those demonstrating good preventive habits and related health outcomes could receive increased subsidisation.

When I arrived in Singapore 15 months ago to join NUS' Faculty of Dentistry as its dean, I was surprised that dental care was not a part of Healthier SG. This omission needs rectification, and as Prof Teo outlined, with encouragement on prioritising prevention over corrective treatments.

The workforce to achieve this is

not limited to dentists, but must include oral health therapists, the key behaviour change agents in the dental team.

Let's also consider non-dental workers, such as other health or social workers, neighbours, community centres and workplaces, to contribute to improving dental health in the community.

It's time for us to focus on making the whole greater than the sum of the parts by integrating all stakeholders into the dental team.

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