



DID YOU KNOW?

Tooth loss can have a significant emotional impact on our patient's lives with Editor Adela Laverick

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To continue with the ITI World symposium theme of 'patient centred solutions' Adela Laverick focuses on tooth loss at the patient level and explores its potential emotional effects.

The aim of dental implant treatment is, by definition, always to replace missing teeth. The patient is the beneficiary of the treatment and should enjoy an improved quality of life as a result of successful dental implant treatment. In recent years, dental implant education has focused mainly on 'how' to provide the treatment: predominantly on different surgical and restorative techniques and materials. The recent ITI World Symposium program aimed to bring the education focus back to the patient and included 7 different patient-centred scenarios with concerns voiced by the patient, with each scenario discussed by a panel of eminent speakers. This refreshing and relevant approach prioritised the patient in the treatment plan and provided an excellent platform for discussion and learning.

‘The impact that tooth loss can have on people and their lives should not be underestimated’

This was the conclusion of a paper by Davis and co-workers (1). The paper surveyed 94 edentulous people and found that 45% experienced difficulty accepting the loss of teeth. Within this group, patients were more likely to feel less confident and also to feel inhibited in everyday activities such as eating. Interestingly, even if patients could accept the tooth loss, they still didn't feel comfortable enough to share the problem with friends. This paper begins to highlight the effect of tooth loss at an individual patient level.

Tooth loss can have marked emotional effects on our patients

Fiske and co-workers explored the range of reaction to, and feelings about tooth loss (2). The researchers were surprised at the depth of feeling that existed in patients even when they were apparently coping well with dentures. Many common negative emotional reactions were identified. For many patients the loss of teeth caused a feeling of 'bereavement,' or a feeling of 'having lost a part of oneself.' Having lost teeth, many experienced a lack of confidence and had concerns about their appearance and self-image, with some patients being fearful of premature ageing. There was also a concern about tooth loss being a 'taboo' subject that had to be kept secret and therefore significant anxiety surrounding prosthodontic privacy, such as the fear of removing dentures prior to a hospital procedure.

These strong and profoundly negative emotional effects will inevitably undermine patients' confidence with ordinary daily social interactions and should not be underestimated.

Tooth loss can affect simple daily activities such as eating and laughing in public

This research was extended by Fiske and co-workers to a second study (3) that looked at the emotional effects of tooth loss in patients in 3 different geographical locations: London, Dundee and Hong Kong. This study demonstrated that 49% of their patients reported difficulties accepting tooth loss and explored the impact on more specific personal and daily activities. Across all of the centres, patients reported problems with eating that included choosing to restrict food choices and avoiding eating in public. On a personal level, some patients shared that they avoided going out in public, laughing in public and forming close relationships. These are fundamental daily activities that dentate patients are able to take for granted, and the deleterious effect on such simple daily activities truly highlights the potentially life-changing effects of tooth loss for our patients.

Implant treatment can help to resolve these social, psychological and functional disabilities

The replacement of teeth using dental implant treatment can help to overcome some of these profound challenges.

Following publication of the McGill consensus in 2002 (4) it is now accepted that there is overwhelming evidence that a 2-implant overdenture should become the first choice of treatment for the edentulous mandible. Patients report greater satisfaction with the stability and retention of their prostheses which, in turn, contributes to greater satisfaction with comfort and the ability to chew different foods.

Within dental literature there is an acknowledged lack of standardized outcome assessment methods which in turn hampers the more specific understanding of the benefits of implant treatment at the patient level. Nonetheless, there are many papers reporting positively on patient related outcome measures (PROMs) with dental implant treatment

In 2018 an ITI consensus report (5) looked at the PROMs of various dental implant treatments. The report concluded that there is high patient satisfaction with the appearance of implant-supported fixed dental restorations and in addition, there is high satisfaction of edentulous patients that are restored with both fixed and removable full arch prostheses.

A focus on the patient journey

As a specialist Prosthodontist, I have been fortunate to provide implant restorations for patients for over 20 years. I feel privileged to have been involved in so many individual journeys and to be able to help to return comfort, confidence and ease of function to my patients. Implant treatment is a journey for our patients in so many ways: the time, the cost, the number of appointments and the psychological journey from the acceptance of tooth loss to the adaptation to the new restoration. Over time and with increasing experience I have learnt to acknowledge the significant emotional toll that tooth loss can have for some patients. It is important to acknowledge this and to demonstrate emotional empathy with our patients as we guide them through their individual implant treatment journey. It is equally wonderful to share their positive emotions of relief and joy when they see their new teeth for the first time.

In the words of patients

With this article I aimed to bring the treatment focus back to the patient level; as such, there is no better place to finish than with the words of patients themselves. These few quotes taken directly from patient testimonials highlight the immense personal value of implant treatment at an individual level:

'I am now able to talk, smile and EAT normally again'

'It is difficult to put a price on the health and well-being benefit of my new teeth, but the investment of time and money was well worth it'

'The difference the treatment has made is immeasurable, both in my appearance, self-confidence and eating ability.'

'The confidence and freedom I now have in eating and to openly smile, along with the sense of pride this imbues, is something I will always be extremely grateful for. Thank you to all the team: your combined knowledge and skills have created the most outstanding visual, physical and emotional result for me. Thank you for my new lease of life.'

Every clinician that is privileged to play a role in a patient's implant journey, must always remember that first and foremost, it is **the patient's journey**. For every individual journey we should always remember that alongside the physical treatment needs, there is likely to also be an emotional need related to the tooth loss. I urge us all to allow adequate time and consideration to not just perceive, but also to acknowledge and understand this psychological need. We are fortunate that implant treatment can often provide a solution, and sometimes 'a new lease on life.'

References:

- (1) Davis DM, Fiske J, Scott B, et al. The emotional effects of tooth loss: a preliminary study. Br Dent J 2000; 188: 503-506
- (2) Fiske J, Davis DM, Frances C, Gelbier S. The emotional effects of tooth loss in edentulous people. Br Dent J 1998; 184: 90-93
- (3) Fiske J, Davis M, Leung K, McMillan A, Scott B. The emotional effects of tooth loss in partially dentate people attending prosthodontic clinics in dental schools in England, Scotland and Hong Kong: A preliminary investigation. Int Dent J 2001; Dec 51 (6): 457-462.
- (4) Fine J S et al. The McGill Consensus Statement on Overdentures. Mandibular 2-implant overdentures as first choice standard of care for edentulous patients. Gerodontology 2002; July 19 (1): 3-4.
- (5) Feine J et al. Group 3 ITI Consensus Report: Patient-reported outcome measures associated with implant dentistry. Clin Oral Implants Res 2018 Oct; 29 Suppl 16: 270-275.