A friend of mine recently had a bacterial infection. In telling me about his problems, the first thing he mentioned was that he had experienced symptoms of dry mouth and matured biofilm. He had also suffered from hypersensitive teeth.

My friend’s example, though trivial in nature, is a good example by which to demonstrate the way the oral cavity functions as a window to the outside world. The latest research has shown that it can be a very reliable indicator of our inner state of health. Every day, the salivary glands secrete over 1.5 litres of saliva into the oral cavity, carrying with it valuable information. These biomarkers can be from sites of disease, or the salivary glands themselves can produce surrogate biomarkers of disease. The good news is that the information provided by these can be obtained non-invasively, painlessly, and with no embarrassment to the patient—without needles or cringing.

Owing to these salivary properties, a dental examination today is no longer only about teeth and gums. Dentists should be aware that they are probably the first to detect signs of significant diseases in their patients. Take HIV/AIDS for example: despite new, effective medication, the latest infection rates still demonstrate a continued increase in poor and developing countries alike. According to a recent report by UNAIDS, for example, an estimated 50 million women in Asia alone are at risk of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS by their intimate partners in the next decade. Early detection could significantly reduce morbidity here.

Oral fluid testing technologies are under development and already in use in several dental offices in Europe and the US. It will be years, perhaps even decades, before these tests are a regular part of every visit to the dentist, but there is no doubt that they will play a valuable part in the management and control of worldwide epidemics, such as HIV/AIDS or cancer.

Yours sincerely,
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Dental Tribune welcomes comments, suggestions and contains all feedback to dental-tribune.com