Managing oral health for good quality of life

An interview with Dr Stuart Smith, GSK

Dr Stuart Smith has worked as a dentist and teacher in several dental hospitals and schools in the UK. In 2002 he became Vice President of Global Dental Scientific and Professional Communications for GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), a large multinational pharmaceutical company with an extensive consumer healthcare division. DT Asia Pacific editor Claudia Salviczek spoke with Dr Smith about GSK's approach to oral care management.

Claudia Salviczek: Dr Smith, GSK is developing solutions for the oral health management of customers throughout the world. In your opinion, what impact do oral diseases have on people’s lives?

Dr Smith: Oral diseases can have a massive and varied impact on the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Dental caries has been declining in many markets but remains a significant problem around the world not only causing pain for the individual but also for the school and work days of children and work days for adults. Gum diseases remain a common reason for tooth loss which in turn can have a dramatic impact on someone’s self-esteem. There is increasing concern in the links between periodontal and its role in systemic health and the role of the microbiome may have in the process. Other oral diseases, such as dentine hypersensitivity and xerostomia, can also impact an individual’s quality of life with patients having to modify the way they live their lives to cope with the condition.

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DrRid has become globalised as well?

It certainly seems that the world is becoming a smaller place. Whilst historically R&D has been conducted in Europe and USA it is now becoming much more evenly spread throughout the world. GSK consumer healthcare has now established R&D facilities and capabilities in India and China and are constantly seeking ways of building collabora-
tive relationships in Asia to ensure we capitalise on the scientific expertise and capabilities in this region.

What are the benefits of these relationships?

Through such collaborations we access an extensive knowledge base and gain insights into the specific health needs of the individual countries. We also recognise that most important new therapeutic breakthroughs will be discovered by researchers in universities and organisations throughout the world. We embrace this through a system of open innovation where we partner with the inventors and collabora-
tively develop products and solutions that provide consistent support for patients and healthcare professionals around the world.

Can you give us an example?

A simple example is that whilst approximately one in three people report suffering from dentine hypersensitivity only half of these patients will actually mention it to their dentist and so the treatment may go untreated.

Where does the consumer factor into this process?

Consumers increasingly not only want to be healthy but to be happy with their smile and be confident in social settings without having to undertake avoiding habits such as consumers with dentine hyper-
sensitivity avoiding ice cream or denture wearers having to avoid hard foods. We spend much time and money talking with consumers both in groups and individually to really understand how they feel and what they want. The consumer insights that this generates enables us to develop products or educational materials that directly target the needs of our customers.

The GSK company mission is to help people to do more, feel better and live longer.

You have been with GSK for 15 years. How does your work routine in a corporate environment compare to your university experience?

Much of the work is very similar; the objectives of dental academic researchers and industry are very closely aligned. Both are looking to improve patient lives, support healthcare professionals and treat outcomes for patients. Our task is to provide products that enable these improvements and this research and development is inevitably undertaken in collabora-
tion with academic partners.

What does the development process for new products look like?

Oral healthcare fits perfectly within the GSK company mission, which is to help people to live longer, feel better and have less. We recognise that a consumer healthcare all products that are developed must be expert recommended and consumer preferred so this means we need to work extensively with external experts, customers and patients to develop will deliver against the needs of the dental profession.

To be successful as a company we need to provide effective products but that products that patients find acceptable and want to use. It is our job to understand the needs and wishes of consumers to ensure that we provide products that meet their requirements and that they want to use. It doesn’t matter how effective a product is, it will only work if it is used.

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It seems that you are also working closely with HCPs... Absolutely. GSK and HCPs strive towards the same goal: understand and serving the needs of the patients. In order to do so successfully, good communication and a close working relationship with HCPs are essential.

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This results in benefits for patients and has a positive impact on how the dental practice is perceived.

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You say that people need to be educated in order to achieve a change in oral care behaviour. What are some of the measures GSK takes to facilitate this change?

Positive health behaviour change to prevent disease is generally very difficult to implement. Dental disease is no different in this regard. Other conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and reducing tobacco usage are tackled with large groups of consumers who have used the products at home in real life conditions for prolonged periods to ensure patient acceptability.

We undertake programmes to raise awareness of dental health, oral disease and measures that can be taken to control it. This can also serve to increase regular visits to the dentist and open dialogue between patients and dentists, which all help to facilitate positive health change.

It can be a similar situation with dental care professionals around the world. We are aware that it is critical both that the flavour and mouthfeel of our products are acceptable to drive compliance. It is no good having a really effective product if the patient won’t use it.

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