“HIV tests should be offered in every dental practice”
An interview with Dr Catrise Austin, VIP Smiles, New York

According to the latest figures from the United Nations Organisation UNAIDS, more than 34 million people worldwide have HIV, and living with the HIV virus. Since it can take up to ten years before progressing to AIDS, early testing can be a life-saving factor. New tests for HIV checks in dental practices have recently been developed. Dental Tribune Asia Pacific met with Dr Catrise Austin, who maintains a dental practice on 57th Street in New York City, to speak about HIV testing in her practice and how such testing could help to create a heightened awareness of the disease amongst patients.

Dental Tribune Asia Pacific: Dr Austin, could you tell our readers the reason you decided to offer free HIV tests to your patients?
Dr Catrise Austin: The idea for offering free HIV tests to my patients arose earlier this year once I had learnt that doctors other than medical doctors can offer HIV testing in their practices. I said to myself why not add another service to our existing checklist of lesions or cavities and give patients the opportunity to know their status in a different way. I tell them every time that the test is very easy to apply without making the patient feel uncomfortable. I guess that like most new ideas it takes some getting used to, but it will be successful because we are helping to save people’s lives. So, we hope to get more dentists all over New York to offer the test and it would be fantastic if we were able to diagnose everyone who is HIV/AIDS infected.

Unfortunately, the virus is still highly prevalent. In New York City alone, there are 94,000 confirmed cases and it seems that the number of infections is not improving in 2009/2010.

Why should dental offices test for infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS or Tuberculosis?
My opinion is that HIV tests should be offered in every dental practice because the oral cavity is one of the first places that shows signs of HIV infection. You can detect signs of herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases in the mouth as well, and so we look for lesions and other signs or symptoms of the disease.

I am currently not aware of other tests that may diagnose diseases other than HIV/AIDS; it would be fantastic if we were able to diagnose everything through the mouth.

How does the test work?
The test is called OraSure Quick and identifies antibodies in the blood system. It uses an oral swab, which we take under the upper and lower lips and place in a developing solution directly at the beginning of our dental appointments. The results are available within 20 minutes and we can start with normal treatment immediately after we have done the test.

Unfortunately, I often encounter scepticism from some of my colleagues about the comfort level and the way to introduce the test to a patient in a dental setting. I tell them that the test is very easy to apply without making the patient feel uncomfortable. I like what most new ideas it takes some getting used to, but it will be successful because we are helping to save people’s lives.

We are fully trained and prepared in case a test is positive. If a patient tests positive, we counsel him or her immediately and help them with their primary health physician to schedule a confirmatory test. It is important to note that the test that we offer is a screening test only and not a confirmed test. If a patient does not have a physician, we usually refer him or her to one of the clinics in the New York City area with which we have a partnership.

There are thousands of people in the US and more around the world who are unaware that they are HIV/AIDS infected. Do you think that regular checks in dental practices could help to create more awareness of the disease?
That is something I would like to see happening as more dentists begin administering the test. It is time to recognise that we should be concerned with the patient’s holistic health not only his or her oral health.

I am the first dentist in New York to offer the test and I would love to be the trail-blazer and help to make the test the standard of care in dental practices around the world. The greatest joy for me is when a patient says that he or she would have never undergone this test if it were not for me.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Patients have to fill out a consent form before taking the test. (DTAP Photo Daniel Zimmermann)

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