

Changing Names- Age-Old Illness

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Dentistry's understanding of gum disease has undergone major evolutionary change. And, like the weather in Chicago ("just wait awhile, it'll change") and unlike the Cubs ("just wait"), the names assigned to the disease have morphed. Many years ago we thought gum disease was a normal part of aging, thus "long in the tooth" was commonly used to identify seasoned citizens. Early in the 20th century, the primitive dental intelligencia identified the condition as a disease. However, the cause was not known. Gum disease at that point in time was commonly referred to as "Pyorrhea".

More modern dental research discovered the bacterial cause of the illness. With blinders firmly attached, researchers stayed focused on the bacteria's role in the disease. They understood the germs to be the problem, with the infection contained to the gums and the bone underneath.

As research continued, Periodontitis and Gingivitis became the more formal names for gum disease. Answers as to why the disease affected some people vastly differently than others were sought. It was well known that some folks could have bacterial laden plaque on their teeth for years without contracting the disease. On the other hand, others would be conscientious about their home care and still be afflicted. Epidemiologists didn't like this disconnect. It was soon discovered that it was the body's immune response to germs that led to disease severity. The body's reaction to the infection, ala allergies and arthritis (auto-immune), took over lead importance.

Fast forwarding to the state-of-the-art view of gum disease we are changing from a more local (tooth-centric) line of thought to a more generalized and systemic concept of wellness or illness.

In the hallowed halls of dental research, where terminology such as 'annals' and 'ologys' (as in Annals of Periodontology) are tossed around as passionately as frat boys discussing beer and girls, the gum disease-whole body (systemic) link has been well understood for years.

With the pace a snail would sneer at, the American Dental Association (wet-fingered dentists' guiding light) has just recently been pushing a new name for the disease – Systemic Periodontitis. This nomenclatural change reflects the knowledge upgrade. Finally, yet fortunately, organized dentistry's sluggish P.R. machine has kicked into gear. The lay public is now becoming informed of the linkage between gum disease and chronic diseases such as heart disease, Alzheimer's, stroke and diabetes.

Gum disease's many names through the years reflect our changing views of the condition. Remaining constant, however, is its prevention. Meticulous brushing and flossing combined with regular dental visits do the trick. Keep Smiling.

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