The purpose of this report is to review the interrelationship between poor oral health conditions of older people and general health. The impact of poor oral health on quality of life (QOL) is analyzed, and the implications for public health intervention and oral health care are discussed. Findings from the current research may lead to the following conclusions: The available scientific evidence is particularly strong for a direct relationship between diabetes and periodontal disease; the direct relationship between periodontal disease and cardiovascular disease is less convincing. General and associated oral health conditions have a direct influence on older people’s QOL and lifestyle. The growing number of elderly people challenges health authorities in most countries. The evidence on oral health–general health relationships is particularly important to WHO in its effort to strengthen integrated oral health promotion and disease prevention around the globe.

**KEY WORDS:** oral health, general health, quality of life, geriatrics

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**Oral health, general health, and quality of life in older people**

Daniel Kandelman;¹ Poul Erik Petersen;² Hiroshi Ueda³

¹Professor, Faculty of Dental Medicine, University of Montreal, Montreal, Canada; ²Professor, School of Dentistry, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, and Chief, Global Oral Health Programme, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland; ³Health and Ageing Societies Programme, WHO Kobe Centre, Kobe, Japan.

*Corresponding author e-mail: dkandelman@videotron.ca

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**The global demographic transition**

The global population is increasing at an annual rate of 1.2%, while the population of those 65 years or older is increasing at a rate of 2.3%.¹ About 600 million people are currently aged 60 years or older, and this number is expected to double up by 2025.² By 2050, there will be 2 billion older people, 80% of them living in developing countries. The United Nations estimates that persons older than 80 years will comprise 20% of the world population.³ In China, approximately 10% of the total population are 60 years or older; this proportion is expected to increase in the next decades, and a significant proportion of the older population will live in rural areas. In India, the percentage growth of the population aged 60 years or older is much higher than that of other age groups. Life expectancy at birth was only 32 years when the country achieved its independence 50 years ago, whereas the current figure has risen to more than 62 years. In the United States, the age group showing the greatest increase in numbers is the centenarians (people aged 100 years and over). In Japan, the ageing population is changing rapidly, with the proportion of adults 65 years or older at 17.2% in 2000 growing to 28.9% in 2025.¹

The growing proportion of the elderly is attributed mainly to the decrease in mortality rates among older people and overall decline in birth rates. In addition, progress in health care and the implementation of public health measures have extended life expectancies worldwide. The demographic transition challenges health authorities, particularly with regard to the growing burden of disease and its negative impact on quality of life (QOL) of older persons. The burden of disease also includes poor mental health. For instance, a Swedish study⁴ showed that the total number of people suffering from physical and mental disorders is increasing and becoming more difficult to treat. Poor oral health also affects people’s QOL of life with respect to impaired eating, social appearance, and communication.⁵ The rise in life expectancy without improvement in QOL has a direct impact on health expenditures and is becoming a key public health issue in the more developed countries.⁶ It may also become a major burden to countries with high population densities and emerging economies, such as China and India.

The WHO Health Report 2002² identified some major global risks of disease, disability, and death in the world today. The impact of different risks of losing healthy life years is aggravated with ageing because of lower individual resistance, the growing burden of chronic
diseases, and poor socioenvironmental and nutritional conditions. Although most persons can now look forward to living longer, the risk of developing at least one chronic disease (such as hypertension or diabetes) increases with age; this reflects more of a cumulative effect of a lifelong exposure to risk factors and is not related to chronological age per se.1 The World Oral Health Report 20037 emphasizes that oral diseases are age related, that the risk factors for chronic disease are common to most oral diseases, and that oral health is an integral part of general health and an important component of QOL. Chronic diseases are more prevalent in the older population, whose age-associated physiological changes may deprive them of their mobility and independence.2

For the 21st century, the challenge to control chronic disease and improve oral health and general health can only be tackled effectively through shared approaches and with a focus on common risk factors. In order to address these issues in public health programs, it is important to ascertain to what extent oral health is linked to general health. The association between oral and general health may be more apparent in old age. The purpose of this report is to review the literature on the interrelationships between poor oral health conditions of older people and general health. The impact of poor oral health on QOL is analyzed and the implications for public health intervention and oral health care are discussed. The evidence on oral health–general health relationships is particularly important to WHO in its efforts to strengthen integrated oral health promotion and disease prevention around the globe.

Psychosocial function, general health, and oral health

Many physiological changes take place as part of aging, such as decreasing vigor, as the general metabolism slows down. Hearing and sight, smell, and taste may be impaired to some degree.8 The general body physiology is affected, along with organ functions, including reduction in heart strength, reduction of ventilatory capacity of the lungs, slower nerve transmission in the brain, decreased muscle mass, and increased risk of endocrine problems.8 Activities involving locomotion may also be impaired due to loss of elasticity in supporting structures.9 Changes in oral function remain minor as long as oral health status is preserved; however, the situation can be quickly compromised if oral health is not maintained.8

In an attempt to identify target groups for which oral health care can be rendered, older people may be classified into three categories according to psychosocial function.10

1. The functionally independent older adult
2. The frail older adult
3. The functionally dependent older adult

Individuals in the first group can remain largely independent even if they have some chronic diseases that need ongoing health care. Individuals in the next two groups need assistance in maintaining the most basic levels of personal care. The third group includes those individuals requiring special care at home or in institutions. In most developing countries, family and social support structures are eroding due to a variety of factors, and frail older individuals are consequently at high disease risk.11 In older persons, socioeconomic factors such as low income, low education, and weak social support are shown to be closely related to functional impairment in oral health.12,14 Petersen and Nortov13 found that inactive lifestyles and weak family networks are highly associated with poor oral and general health and dental care habits among old-age pensioners. Recent studies9,15–17 have indicated a direct relationship between reduced functional capacities and poorer personal oral hygiene as well as declining use of dental services.

Mental health

Mental illness is particularly problematic in the elderly population due to the increased prevalence of dementia with increasing age.18 Dementia may affect the individuals’ ability to perform appropriate oral hygiene procedures, and a few studies19–27 have been conducted to ascertain if dementia would have a negative effect on the oral health of older people. A study assessing the oral health of psychiatric elderly in-patients in South Wales19 demonstrated a higher prevalence of edentulism than in the general population of the respective age group, as well as relatively poor oral hygiene and a higher score of dental caries experience. This confirms previous findings from a similar study in Denmark.20 Periodontitis is a problem in older adults, and psychosocial stress may induce neglect of oral hygiene and poor periodontal health.21,22 Furthermore, resistance to periodontal therapy has been reported in people suffering from psychosocial problems.22 Persson et al.23 reported that depression was not associated with a greater risk of periodontitis in older adults but was associated with tooth loss and pain related to chronic disease conditions. Poor mental health status was considered as a risk factor in a six-year prospective cohort study of tooth loss and edentulism among institutionalised elderly people.24

Dementia and particularly Alzheimer’s disease are frequently seen in older people, and the prevalence rates increase with age.18,25 The progressive loss of intellectual function and memory inevitably leads to deterioration in oral health unless the family or institution are able to assist in oral health care. A study26 assessing the oral health of individuals with dementia in nursing homes reported that moderate-to-severe dementia may have a deleterious effect on the oral health of residents. Chalmers et al.27 reported in a study of community-dwelling older adults that participants with dementia had a significantly higher experience of oral disease and related conditions compared with participants without dementia.

A recent study28 of patients with Parkinson’s disease (PD) analyzed data on oral health conditions and related factors in people aged 60–69 and 70+ years.
ORAL AND GENERAL HEALTH IN OLDER PEOPLE

It was reported that patients with PD often complained of chewing difficulties as many as were edentulous or had swollen gums. Almost half of the patients did not brush their teeth or clean their dentures properly. Complaints about chewing difficulties were most frequent among patients with PD who had dyskinesia and oral dyskinesia. In addition, problems related to poor function of dentures (i.e., loosening or poor retention of denture) were related to lack of muscle coordination and rigid facial muscles. Patients with PD also appeared to have a high risk of losing their teeth because of the use of anticholinergics or monoamine oxidase inhibitors and poor oral health due to xerostomia. Dysphagia is known to be a common symptom in many patients with PD and may result in aspiration pneumonia, especially when oral hygiene is neglected. Daily toothbrushing and cleaning of dentures may be impaired due to resting tremors, akinesis, and bradykinesia.

Visual impairments
Visual impairments can be included among chronic disease conditions associated with poor oral health in old age. The main age-related impairments are cataract, macular degeneration, retinal detachment, and glaucoma. Blindness is also linked with diabetes retinopathy, trachoma, and leprosy. Although the pattern of oral disease in persons with disabilities is shown to be similar to their peers without disabilities, visual impairment can affect an elderly person’s ability to maintain oral health and recognize signs of oral disease such as dental caries or gingival bleeding.

Xerostomic conditions
Xerostomia, the subjective experience of oral dryness, is quite prevalent in older people as roughly 30% of individuals have reported that they are affected by dry mouth. Xerostomia is usually associated with a decreased salivary flow rate (hyposalivation) as well as some psychological factors, but may not necessarily be related to a decreased salivary rate. Traditionally, it was believed that salivary function decreased because of aging. In healthy adults, age-associated changes in salivary composition and flow are minimal. Salivary gland hypofunction (SGH), which is a change in quality and/or quantity of saliva, may be due to the effect of systemic diseases such as diabetes, Sjögren’s syndrome, AIDS, or their treatment. Head and neck radiation or multiple use of medications can cause SGH.

One review listed more than 400 medications implicated in causing xerostomia, the most common being antidepressants, antipsychotics, anti-cholinergics, and antihistamines. It is evident that consumption of multiple medications remains an important etiological factor in dry mouth. The impact of the duration of exposure to medication on salivary hypofunction in unhealthy older people is largely untested, as are the subjective complaints of dry mouth when there is a decrease of salivary flow.

QOL can be compromised by dry mouth as the condition affects mastication, swallowing, and speech. Recent studies have confirmed that dry mouth had a significant and negative impact on the QOL of elderly individuals. Reduced salivary flow may disturb the normal protective mechanisms for the teeth and mucosa. Persons affected are more likely to have oral symptoms such as sensory changes. It appears that some older adults have xerostomia, some have salivary gland hypofunction, some have both conditions, and some have none. Therefore, management of patients affected by xerostomia can be difficult.

Nutrition and oral health
The relationships between oral health status, dietary practices, nutritional status, and general health status are complex. Inadequate nutrition affects oral health, and poor oral health affects food choices. A diet deficient in vitamins, minerals, proteins, and calories can impair the immune system, and for this reason, diet and nutrition are related to oral health, specifically, to oral cancer and dental diseases in older persons. Lack of appetite among the elderly is common, especially in individuals suffering from anorexia, nausea, vomiting, or xerostomia resulting from medication. Food intake is reduced even more among individuals with chronic diseases. A Swiss study of elderly hospitalized patients observed the relationship between clinical parameters of malnutrition, serum albumin level, and indicators related to oral health (dental status, oral hygiene, masticatory function, and salivary secretion rate).

A Florida dental care study, which assessed the dietary implications of oral health among African-American and white older adults, provided evidence that poor oral health and the accompanying functional disability impacted on day-to-day living. Chewing, taste perception, swallowing, and comfort with dentures have been reported to be the leading causes of poor nutritional status in older persons. Poor general health status, dehydration, drugs, and oral dryness directly influence the appetite and diet and nutritional status of older people. The importance of chewing capacity has been well established in relation to nutritional status as the number and distribution of teeth will influence the ease of chewing. The choice of food items becomes largely dependent on the ability to consume them with satisfaction, and certain foods are rejected when they are too hard to chew. The attitude of the elderly in selecting foods is therefore strongly influenced by their ability to chew them effectively.

The status of the teeth and/or prosthesis is an important factor in food selection and dietary fiber consumption. The third National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey (NHANES III) collected information to examine associations between the number of posterior occlusal pairs of teeth and the nutritional status of older adults. The results indicated that dentate status was closely associated with nutritional status, and this suggested that the status of dentition should be considered in nutritional counseling and assessment of needs for older adults.

Chewing function in elderly persons may be compromised if there is loss of teeth and dentures age and wear without maintenance. Individuals living in institutions are more like to have this
Weight loss

Studies of hospitalized and institutionalized older adults suggest a relationship between poor oral health and weight loss. A recent one-year follow-up study among adults 70 years or older identified edentulousness as an independent risk factor for weight loss. A longitudinal survey was designed to determine the association between periodontal disease and weight loss in 1,053 individuals aged 65 years and older. The study showed that the periodontal pockets of at least 6-mm probing depth were significantly associated with weight loss.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a degenerative chronic disease that affects the entire skeleton and is mainly prevalent in older women. An evaluation of cross-sectional studies have shown an association between osteoporosis and periodontal status. Other studies have suggested that periodontitis may be aggravated in people with osteoporosis, but failed to detect such a relationship in the early stages of osteoporosis.

Orofacial pain

Elderly people may be vulnerable to chronic pain because of their systemic diseases. Self-reporting of chronic pain seems to increase up to but not beyond the seventh decade of life; chronic pain in older people is more often experienced from major joints, the back, legs, and feet. A study among Korean elders recognized that orofacial pain was an important problem in geriatric health; older people reported a higher number of disability days because of their pain than the general population.

Impact of oral disease on general health

Oral disease and respiratory diseases

Respiratory diseases are responsible for significant morbidity and mortality in human populations. The upper part of the respiratory tract is in close contact with the oral cavity through the oropharyngeal area. The oral cavity is constantly irrigated by the flow of saliva. Under normal conditions, the movement of saliva has a cleansing and protecting action on teeth and oral mucosa, and it helps to maintain a stable equilibrium between the diverse components of the oral flora. However, this equilibrium may be rapidly disturbed when poor dental hygiene favors dental plaque accumulation causing periodontal disease. This situation occurs frequently among elderly persons, especially when they lose their mobility and independence.

Recent studies have suggested an association between poor oral hygiene and respiratory infection. The relationship of poor dental health and respiratory diseases has been studied in people living in nursing homes and chronic care facility institutions; these individuals are generally more at risk of contracting respiratory infections. Severe respiratory diseases include chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and aspiration pneumonia. Lower respiratory infections may begin as a contamination of the lower airway epithelium by microorganisms present in aerosolized droplets or by aspiration of bacteria from oral secretions. One hypothesis is that oral bacteria may play a role in the exacerbation of COPD and aspiration pneumonia. Another hypothesis is that poor oral health and COPD are linked due to common risk factors.

Aspiration pneumonia

Pneumonia is a disease frequently contracted by elderly people and accounts for the majority of admissions to hospitals from nursing homes. Studies have shown that some of these patients were at high risk of lung infections due to virulent organisms in their oral fluids when they aspirated them. This is seen in chronic care patients whose defense mechanisms (cough reflex mainly) are diminished. Although respiratory tract infections are linked to Streptococcus pneumoniae, sources from the gastroin-testinal tract and oral cavity have also been identified. Respiratory pathogens are commonly found among species of microbes present in dental plaque and periodontal pockets, and they are thought to be responsible for lower lung infections. Aspiration pneumonia—an infection caused by oropharyngeal secretions, food, and/or gastric contents aspirated into the lungs—is found among debilitated older people and patients in intensive care units. A relationship between aspiration pneumonia and periodontal disease has been reported in certain studies where the responsible bacterial species usually found in periodontal pockets have been observed in the lower respiratory tract. Although the list of those agents is getting longer, the identification of the critical species involved is still a matter of debate.

Patients who have swallowing difficulties (dysphagia) provide additional evidence of the importance of oral sources of bacteria in aspiration pneumonia. A study that followed residents living in nursing homes for one year observed that inadequate oral care and difficulty in swallowing (when combined) were significant predictors of radiologically confirmed pneumonia.

Oral health conditions, dental infections, and cardiovascular diseases

Data on oral health status in older people with cardiovascular diseases (CVD) are scarce as the research interest in this relationship has been directed more toward younger adults. Some 20 years ago, attention was drawn to a relationship of dental infections with coronary heart disease and cerebral infarction alongside other independent risk factors including age, hypertension, diabetes, and smoking. More recent studies have suggested an association between dental disease and CVD.

Poor oral health conditions

A relationship between poor oral health and coronary heart disease (CHD) has been reported in a few studies; in which tooth loss and moderate-to-severe periodontal disease were significantly
associated with coronary heart disease. Joshipura et al.\textsuperscript{89} in a six-year follow-up study of 51,529 male health professionals, found a relationship between tooth loss, periodontal disease, and CHD, and suggested that diet and infection were potential mediators of this association. Meurman et al.\textsuperscript{90} investigated the oral health status and health-related behavior of 256 CHD patients referred for open-heart surgery. They observed a poorer oral health status and inadequate oral hygiene practices in the CHD patients as compared with patients who were cardiologically healthy. Oral disease has been suggested as an important factor in the pathogenesis of cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases as oral infection has been found to be a risk factor for atherogenesis and thromboembolic events.\textsuperscript{85} However, the mechanisms involved have not yet been clarified.

**Periodontal disease, missing teeth, and CVD**

A state-of-the-science review\textsuperscript{91} indicated that nine studies suggest that the chronic infection inherent in periodontitis may be associated with cardiovascular events.\textsuperscript{94,85,87,80-87} In a cohort study,\textsuperscript{85} bone loss and pocket depth scores in periodontal disease appeared as a risk factor in coronary heart disease and stroke. Another survey established the relationship of periodontitis with a non-invasive measure of atherosclerosis; this association indicated that an inverse association between the number of teeth and heart rate was statistically significant, after control of confounding factors. Based on a retrospective study from data collected from dental records and health questionnaires among 1,006 adults, Lagervall et al.\textsuperscript{104} confirmed that CVD, diabetes, and rheumatoid disease were significantly correlated to the number of lost teeth, which may represent one aspect of periodontal disease. Matsamura et al.\textsuperscript{103} assessed the cross-sectional association between dental status and blood pressure or heart rate in 499 Japanese who were 80 years old. Results following a multiple regression analysis indicated that an inverse association between the number of teeth and heart rate was statistically significant, after control of confounding factors. Matsamura et al.\textsuperscript{103} confirmed that periodontal disease and fewer teeth may be associated with a greater risk of ischemic stroke.

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**Oral health condition and diabetes**

The relationship between diabetes and periodontal disease has been established in meta-analysis of data from four studies demonstrating a significant association between diabetes mellitus (type 1 and type 2) and periodontal disease.\textsuperscript{107} Löe\textsuperscript{108} even considered periodontal disease as the sixth complication of diabetes mellitus, and Grossi and Genco\textsuperscript{109} proposed the concept of a two-way relationship between periodontal disease and diabetes mellitus. Indeed, it has been shown that the risk and severity of periodontal disease are dependent upon the diabetic patient's glycemic control. Thorstenson and Hugoson\textsuperscript{110} found that, among adults more than 40 years of age, long-duration insulin-dependent diabetic patients had severe periodontal disease, which increased in severity with the duration of diabetes. The evidence available suggests that, because of the senescence of the immune system and greater risk of poor oral hygiene, diabetes in old age may be a risk factor common to heart disease and periodontal disease.\textsuperscript{111,112}
ORAL AND GENERAL HEALTH IN OLDER PEOPLE

Root surface caries and general health
The prevalence of root surface caries is high in older populations. A few studies have examined the possible relationship between oral health and general health risk predictors and the presence of root caries. Loesche and Lopatin stated that root caries was part of the Total Dental Index, which was a good risk predictor of CVD. It is presently difficult to establish any strong relationship between root caries and specific chronic disease related to old age.

Oral cancer and precancer lesions
Cancer of the oral cavity and pharynx have markedly higher rates of morbidity and mortality when compared with other types of cancers, with an overall five-year survival rate of only about 53%. Older people have the greatest risk for the development of premalignant lesions and oral cancer; most cases occur in the age group above 60 years. The major risk factors are smoking and alcohol consumption.

Decline in various defense mechanisms, the presence of common risk factors (smoking, alcohol) related to oral and general health, and lower psychological and socioeconomic status have a significant impact on cancer survival of elderly people. Precancerous lesions such as leukoplakia and lichen planus are frequently seen in older people, and are associated with lower socioeconomic status. Sepehr et al. in northeast Iran evaluated the association between some potential risk factors and squamous dysplasia, which is a precursor lesion of esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (ESCC). They concluded that poor oral health showed a dose–response relationship with ESCC risk and consequently could be considered as a risk factor for this type of cancer.

Oral health, general health, and QOL of older adults
The concept of QOL in health recognizes the value of an individual’s health with the broader psychological and social aspects of life. This model requires that healthcare providers must shift from a narrow disease focus to a broader psychosocial approach. Conceptualizing QOL requires assessing not only factors such as discomfort or pain and oral health function such as mastication and speech, but also emotional and social functions such as appearance and self-esteem as well as perceived needs with regard to general and oral health. QOL is particularly affected by dentate status, including the use of partial and complete dentures. In recent years, research has demonstrated the impact of oral and general health on the QOL in older populations.

Pain, discomfort, mucosal infections, and xerostomic conditions related to multimedication use, as well as tooth loss, can cause a deterioration of QOL. These problems impaire self-esteem, daily life, and well-being. Chronic dry mouth can impact essential aspects of life such as speaking, ingestion of foods, and wearing of dental prostheses. Poor oral health can be related to systemic diseases in a...
two-way relationship, and compromised chewing and eating abilities can impact nutritional status.17 Social relationships also play an important role, as they optimize the well-being of older adults. Slade et al.41 described a model of social relations that helps to explain the relationship between an individual’s personality, behavior, and social network, and its influence on oral health-related quality of life (OHRQOL). Petersen et al.13 established an index of lifestyle activity among old-age pensioners in a Danish community; they found a significant relationship between poor dental health conditions and lowered lifestyle activity. In addition, indices were constructed for the measurement of health support related to involvement of social networks (such as family, friends, or neighbors). This study11 showed that isolated older people have the lowest dental health status and make poor use of health services.

A variety of QOL instruments have been introduced for use in health care.127,129-133 These instruments appear to be more useful for assessment of the impact of use of health services and quantification of the effects from a patient perspective rather than from the biological or physiological perspective. Assessing OHRQOL in medically compromised elderly people, Locker et al.134 found that selected health indicators were significantly associated with those measures, suggesting that oral disorders have a significant effect on the well-being and life satisfaction of older individuals. Findings from an Ontario study of the oral health of older adults suggested that self-perceived poor oral health and poor QOL co-exist in the same subgroup.135 Gift et al.136 found that the perception of general health and epidemiological indicators of oral health status are significant factors in understanding oral health behaviors and OHRQOL. MacEntee et al.137 observed that three factors are usually most important for an older adult’s OHRQOL assessment: lack of pain, ability to maintain proper hygiene, and a disease-free mouth.

A variety of OHRQOL measures in the elderly have been proposed in the literature.138,139 They assess the extent to which oral diseases and disorders affect functioning and psychosocial well-being. Their potential use in geriatric dentistry includes population applications and the use for political, theoretical, and practical reasons. Existing instruments have been mainly designed for cross-sectional rather than for longitudinal studies.38 White140 suggests that currently available OHRQOL instruments have limited applicability in dental clinical care settings.

A state-of-the-science conference on assessing oral health outcomes by measuring health status and QOL emphasized the need to incorporate QOL dimensions.41 However, there is a need for further research in defining the categories of OHRQOL because: (a) little experience is available from their use in long-term studies; (b) adaptation of the instruments to provide valid measures in surveys is needed (i.e., social impact of oral health conditions, perceived objective needs of the individual, and improvement of oral care services); and (c) responsiveness of many OHRQOL assessments has not been established. According to Hebling and Pereira,139 most of the OHRQOL tools have been assessed through a validation process. Thus, comparing OHRQOL among populations, cross-cultural equivalency should be verified and the instruments must exhibit consistent findings by different researchers in different settings. Recently, WHO developed an operational measure of ORHQOL for population surveys and emphasized the need for incorporating QOL measures in evaluation of community-based oral health promotion.141

A few recent studies142-144 have suggested that implant-supported restorations144 and particularly implant overdentures may improve a patient’s QOL and provide better function and comfort.142 However, it is important to note that considering the high cost of these restorations, they cannot be provided for all older people, in all situations and all countries.

Impact of demographical, social, and cultural factors on dental health and on seeking dental care

Although data on oral health status are scarce, particularly in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the available evidence shows oral health disparities among older people across and within countries.145 These disparities mainly relate to living conditions and the availability of services for seniors, as well as the differences between rural and urban areas. Early Canadian surveys146-148 reported differences in dental needs and oral health conditions for the home-bound, nursing home, or institutionalized older adults. At about the same time, a review of the Swedish literature149 on older people’s dental health reported a higher frequency of edentulousness among institutionalized elderly people than among those living at home. Slade et al.150 observed that institutionalized older persons were more than twice as likely to be edentulous than noninstitutionalized older persons.

Socioeconomic and education levels are important determinants of oral and general health conditions.151 The World Health Organization International Collaborative Studies (ICS)1152,153 has reported on the extent of social inequity in oral health across and within countries. Epidemiological studies conducted over the past 20 years or so show that inequalities in oral health are even more pronounced among older adults.154-160 Surveys carried out in the United Kingdom,134 Quebec, Canada,155 and Denmark156 demonstrated that the social gradient in tooth loss and dentate status remained stable over time, and similar gradients by income, education, or social class were also observed with respect to the utilization of professional dental services. In older populations, an association between dental health behavior and dental health status has also been documented.16,151,154,156,157 A Japanese
survey\textsuperscript{158} used the oral health impact profile (OHIP-14) to evaluate the impact of oral disease on OHRQOL in a group of independently living elderly persons in an urban area of Japan, and no significant relation was found between the measures of oral and general health and sociodemographic variables.

Previous studies\textsuperscript{154,159,160} have shown that dental caries experience in older adults varies by socioeconomic status, whereas the social gradient with regard to periodontal health status was weaker.\textsuperscript{14,161} Poor periodontal status in disadvantaged population groups was complicated by the influence of tooth loss, wearing of removable dentures, chronic systemic diseases, and high tobacco consumption.

### Concluding remarks on the interrelationships between oral health and general health

The association between oral and systemic disease has been evaluated by epidemiologic and clinical studies.\textsuperscript{21,162,163} Several biological mechanisms have been suggested such as inflammatory mediators from oral inflammatory conditions such as gingivitis and periodontitis. The evidence is strong that medications can provoke malabsorption of vitamins and minerals essential for health.

Findings from the current research and the use of the strength-of-evidence criteria\textsuperscript{165} for causal links between oral health and general health indicators have led to the following conclusions:

- The available scientific evidence is strong for a direct relationship between diabetes and periodontal disease and also suggests a relation between periodontal disease and diabetes control.
- The evidence of a direct relationship between periodontal disease and CVD and between periodontal disease and respiratory diseases is less convincing. Evidence is limited by the lack of consistency and the fact that most studies have used a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal design or have inadequate controls for confounding factors. An appropriate analysis with adequate adjustment for age, tobacco use, and other factors suggests that observed associations between periodontitis and CVD could be coincidental rather than causal.
- The impact of xerostomia—dry mouth—on the health of the oral cavity has significant biological plausibility. One problem lies in distinguishing the effects of medications on dry mouth from those of the underlying health condition. There is good evidence that dry mouth negatively affects oral function and QOL.
- Biological and behavioural factors are implicated in the complex two-way relationships between inadequate nutrition and weight loss on the one hand and poor oral health status on the other. Diet and nutrition in old age are affected by changes in the immune system, by tooth loss and the status of the oral cavity, and by environmental factors. The evidence is strong that medications can provoke malabsorption of vitamins and minerals essential for health.
- Psychosocial factors and common risk factors may be involved in the association between poor mental health and visual impairment and poor oral health.
- Men and women may need to be examined separately since biophysical change and experience may be gender specific.

### Translating knowledge into solutions

WHO goals for better oral health for older people have not yet been adequately addressed by countries worldwide. Reducing social inequity in oral and general health as well as improving accessibility to oral health services remain the key issues, in particular for older people.\textsuperscript{145,166}

Promoting health of the aging population will undoubtedly require multiple actions by public health authorities, and these decisions must be based on an understanding of the determinants of health.\textsuperscript{2} As the risk factors responsible for chronic systemic diseases are common to most oral diseases, the common risk factor approach may be instrumental in the planning and surveillance of oral health promotion and oral disease intervention programs.\textsuperscript{7,145} Health and oral health policies will also have to consider the life course perspective in order to preserve good oral and general health and maintain QOL. Finally, during
any knowledge transfer, it is essential that cultural values and beliefs associated with the health of populations at which these activities are aimed are observed and understood. Also, the social and family environments are particularly important when dealing with older populations.

The Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion was endorsed by WHO in 1986, and subsequent global meetings have followed up on defining strategies for promoting health. The relevant approaches comprise policy development, legislation, community action, and organizational change. In 2005, WHO organized the so-called Bangkok meeting that focused on strengthening health promotion in a globalized world. The Bangkok Charter identified a number of required actions for translation of the available science on promoting health. The effective use of science may be achieved when all sectors of society take appropriate actions and when promotion of health is made a core responsibility for all of national governments and health authorities. Adopting the principles of the Bangkok Charter, the Liverpool Declaration (www.who.int/oral_health) specified the actions needed for governments to undertake in order to achieve better oral health and the important target groups include older people.

In order to promote the oral health of older people, action must be taken at several levels:

- Strengthening health promotion and integrated disease prevention
- Educating caregivers, older adults, and their families on oral health
- Educating older adults and creating healthy environments
- Undertaking research in public health and epidemiological research on oral health—general health links and common risk factors and QOL
- Capacity building within oral health systems, based on age-friendly primary health care
- Improving social security and health insurance coverage for older adults
- Monitoring oral health and evaluating health care

Developing comprehensive policies on ageing in order to improve health and oral health of the older adults will constitute a real challenge to oral healthcare providers and particularly to the oral health profession. Greater attention on the part of health professionals to the oral health status of elderly people may reduce the prevalence of oral cancer in the older adult population. Early detection and referral of oral cancer are critical steps that affect the success of treatment and survival rates. There is a specific concern about the situation in most developing countries where access to health services, primary health facilities, and health personnel are limited.

Conclusion

The growing numbers of elderly people represent a great challenge to health authorities in most countries. First, the demand for expensive dental care will increase for active older persons in addition to the frail and institutionalized elderly; second, public health authorities will have to face the growing burden of oral disease associated with the new chronic disease profile of aging societies. Failure to deal with these important demographic imperatives and rapid changes in disease patterns and interrelations will have behavioral, socioeconomic, and political consequences.

As shown in this review, general and associated oral health conditions have a direct influence on older people's QOL and lifestyle. The negative impact of poor oral health conditions on general health and QOL of older adults is an important public health issue; WHO recommends that countries develop national public health programs, based on integrated prevention and health promotion, and that measurable goals be formulated for improving the oral health of the elderly.

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ORAL AND GENERAL HEALTH IN OLDER PEOPLE

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