

Strengthening oral health policy in an aging society

The unavoidable reality of population aging is affecting our society on a global scale. Biological aging makes elderly people more susceptible to disease and leads to a decline in the bodily functions needed for daily living. Dental and oral health itself is essential for the lifelong maintenance of quality of life (QOL), and research has furthermore established that dental and oral health contributes to the maintenance and improvement of general health.

The realization of a “society of longevity” is a result of human advancement. On the other hand, the decline of vital functions and health with age is something we cannot avoid biologically. To address this seemingly paradoxical issue, we urgently need to develop a social structure and health care system that will allow elderly individuals to lead their lives with purpose and dignity. To this end, specific measures have been taken to reduce health inequalities among generations and regions, thereby extending healthy life expectancy in each and every individual.

Since the implementation of a universal health insurance system in 1961, the health status of the people of Japan has improved considerably and the country has achieved a level of longevity greater than anywhere else in the world. As the nation standing at the forefront of the society of longevity, Japan has a responsibility to report its experiences to the world, particularly concerning its healthcare policies and campaigns as well as our attempts to reform its healthcare system.

The basic dental and oral functionality is associated with self-expression and socialization—which are fundamental human rights—through diet and communication. In the long run, dental and oral health is also associated with vital prognosis in humans. In fact, an accumulation of evidence suggests that dental care and oral health can and do contribute to the realization of healthy longevity.

To ensure that dental care and oral health maximally contributes to attaining healthy longevity, it is essential to accumulate clear evidence and take the specific actions needed to ensure that dental care and oral health has a secure and established position within an effective and efficient social security system and healthcare policy. Against this backdrop, the efforts have to be undertaken as follows:

- Health and medical care systems should be developed in such a way that even in old age, anyone can receive the dental care and oral health services they need, no matter where they live.
- Dental health care personnel should make continuous efforts to communicate the current evidence regarding dental care, oral health, and healthy longevity to citizens and health policymakers.
- The development of health and medical technology should be promoted, in addition to training human resources that provide evidence-based health and medical services.
- A strong body of evidence shows that the prevention of tooth loss contributes to healthy longevity. Through bidirectional efforts involving medical and community health services, greater efforts should be made to prevent dental diseases and the tooth loss that results from these diseases.
- Dental health care personnel and relevant organizations should work together to enact measures that target the risk factors which are common to both oral diseases and non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and

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they should also work to develop health systems based on a continuous life-course approach covering the period from adulthood to old age.

- Efforts should be made, from the standpoint of dental health care provision, to accumulate evidence regarding the effects of maintaining and recovering masticatory function and occlusal support, as well as the effect of prevention and control of dental diseases on systemic health.
- High-quality research should be conducted to accumulate evidence which further clarifies the causal relationship linking dental and oral health to healthy longevity.
- Efforts should be made to estimate the medical economic effects of dental and oral health policy implementation as well as evidence accumulation.
- Evidence-based health policies which reflect the association between current dental and oral health and the extension of healthy life expectancy should be implemented, and studies verifying the effectiveness of these policies should be undertaken.

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