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. He recently 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 Salwiczek spoke with Dr Smith about GSK’s approach to oral care management.

Claudia Salwiczek: 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 individuals but also daily school days of schooling for children and working days for adults. Gum diseases remain a common cause of tooth loss which in turn can have a dramatic impact on someone’s self-esteem. There is a strong association in the links between periodontal disease and systemic health, and the role that the disease may play in the process. Other oral diseases, such as denture hypersensitivity and xerostomia, can also impact an individual’s quality of life with patients wanting to modify the way they live their lives to cope with their condition. Hence, improvements in prevention and treatment of dental diseases must remain a priority.

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 for ways to improve preventive and treatment outcomes for patients. Our task is to provide products that enable these improvements and this research and development is inevitably undertaken in collaboration 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 do more, feel better and live longer. Within 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 to ensure that the products we develop will deliver against the needs of the dental profession.

To be successful as a company we need to provide effective products but products that patients find acceptable and want to use. It is true that we need to work on understanding 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.

We typically work with independent global academic teams to look at the therapeutic area throughout new product development. This collaboration is ongoing right from the beginning of the project when professional insights and advice are sought right through to the research phase to publication of the work in scientific journals and scientific and educational symposiums. This provides the evidence that dental healthcare professionals (HCPs) around the world expect and demand.

So has this become globalised as well?

It certainly seems that the world is becoming a smaller place. Whilst historically most 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 collaborating 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 oral health needs of the individual countries. We also recognise that most important new therapeutic breakthroughs will be discovered by researchers in universities and research institutions throughout the world. We embrace this through a system of open innovation where we partner with the inventors and collaboratively develop products and the condition. HCPs have been able to provide consistent support for their patients and successfully manage dentine hypersensitivity.

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

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?

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

With your Sensodyne toothpaste brand you say you have developed a solution for this problem.

Indeed. Sensodyne is the most widely used toothpaste in the world by patients suffering from dentine hypersensitivity 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.

Can you give us an example?

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

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 use. GSK works with dental healthcare professionals to improve education amongst the profession and also in its communication with consumers. We undertake programmes to raise awareness of dental health, dental 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 behaviour change. Attitudes to dental health and personal responsibility by our own health are also changing but take time as children’s attitudes will be heavily influenced by their parents’ experiences and beliefs. It is hugely advantageous if positive health behaviours can be established at a young age.

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