



## *Thursday Memo – May 7, 2015*

### **Immigration, Oral Health, and Privilege - Anonymous**

I met P, a 75 year-old mother and grandmother hailing from rural, mainland China, while shadowing a clinic operated by one of the local dental hygiene schools. At the behest of her primary care physician, P had been coming to the clinic for the past few months and had been diagnosed with severe, chronic periodontal disease, due to lack of routine oral health care. This would be her fourth of six visits required for her initial treatment of the disease, a sort of deep cleaning and debridement of plaque.

She was accompanied, as she was most days, by her husband, G. Both had recently immigrated from China during the previous year in order to be closer to their children. P often struggled to communicate in her new surroundings, though her husband had an easier time having learned some English during his school days and, therefore, frequently served as her interpreter.

In an effort to understand more about oral health from their perspectives, I asked G about his understanding of what “good dental care” meant. Excitedly, he whipped out a tablet from his bag, equipped with a unique translation software. We launched into our conversation, occasionally pausing to allow him time to draw out characters in Mandarin on the touch screen. He recounted a memory from his first visit to the United States more than 10 years ago, when he saw his daughter-in-law fastidiously brushing the teeth of his grandson, then only a toddler. He marveled at how basic dental hygiene and preventative care started so early here in the U.S., as he and his wife had never been exposed to this. Growing up, they recognized early that routine dental care was, in fact, a luxury not entitled to families of their socioeconomic status. As such, they only visited the dentist whenever they experienced severe pain, or as G appropriately put it, “once it is too late.”

He smiled, remembering the first time he used an electric toothbrush, how clean and new his teeth felt afterwards. G and P both pointed to the dental hygiene students and their instructor, excitedly telling me about the thorough and complete care they had provided. Despite the fact that it takes the two of them nearly two hours, using the public transportation system in our city, to travel from their senior housing to the clinic, both P and G are grateful for the care they receive there. Proudly, G announced that once P has completed her treatment, he too, will become a patient at the clinic.

My conversation with P and G at the clinic reminded me that among the plethora of obstacles and needs many immigrants face when arriving to this country, receiving appropriate dental care is likely a concern that is frequently overlooked. In my experience as a student, of the multitude

of questions we ask recent immigrants about personal and medical history, very rarely do we explore the topic of oral health and what exposure to proper care they may or may not have had.

Being the child of immigrants to this country myself, I asked my own parents about their dental care growing up in India. Like P and G, they came from humble beginnings and viewed oral health care as a privilege bestowed only upon the wealthy, and were wholly unaware of what appropriate dental care looked like. I found this odd because, for as long as I can remember, my mother has been hyper-vigilant about stressing the importance of brushing and flossing our teeth and routinely getting our teeth cleaned every six months. I always just assumed her motivations were purely aesthetic, but when I asked her, she told me about the apparent feverishness over dental care she noted when she first came to this country. “Everyone made such a big deal about caring for their teeth,” she said. But it wasn’t until much later, when she became a mother, that she truly came to understand what all the fuss was about. She told me how grateful she was for the opportunity to “start fresh” and educate us about the importance of healthy habits as a means to stave off disease. In the end, my visit with P and G helped me recognize what I once perceived as my mother being “pushy” about my teeth, was actually her encouraging me to take advantage of my own privileged access to health care, something that, unlike either of my parents, I was lucky enough to have.