



## *Thursday Memo – January 8, 2016*

### **No concern is insignificant – by Kevin Abraham**

As I watched her meticulously navigate through each patient's mouth, many of whom were either confused about what she was actually doing and some who were not able to respond at all, I wondered to myself, what could be her motivation for doing this every day? As a medical student, I've spent the last 4 years trying to learn every nook and cranny about the body, and if I had a dime for every time I've lost motivation for what I'm doing, I'd probably be debt free by now. However, here I was working alongside a woman who was performing her work with so much care and satisfaction, and has been for years now. Where was that coming from?

BJ Brown is a geriatric dental hygienist who has been working at different nursing centers caring for elderly populations for several years. She is extremely good at what she does, as evidenced by the warm welcome I watched her receive from both the residents and staff as she began her daily rounds at the Edgewater nursing home. In fact, she is valued so much that medical teams stop her for curbside consults about patients with challenging denture removals and questions about surgical options, and she swiftly offers her expert advice. Even family members of patients are happy to see her, and provide updates about their loved ones' health and recent trips to the dentist. All the while, BJ answered my rapid fire questions about oral care across a lifetime, from when a child should first see the dentist, to what type of specialized care someone with braces might need, to the difference between crowns, bridges, and fillings, and so on. Aside from assessing for pharyngeal exudates and enlarged tonsils, I soon realized I really knew nothing about oral care, and BJ met my questions with more enthusiasm than I anticipated. Again, I thought to myself, am I crazy, or is she just that excited about her work and the opportunity to teach? Whatever it was that BJ had for breakfast that morning, I needed to get my hands on it!

When I debriefed with BJ at the end of our day, I asked her if she would be willing to share one piece of advice for me as I hope to go on to be a primary care physician. BJ's face suddenly changed, and I wondered if I had said something wrong. She answered that the one thing she wished doctors knew was how important oral care actually is, and that overlooking it can lead to devastating consequences for patients and their families. BJ went on to tell the story of her father who was admitted to the ICU several years ago, and days later acutely decompensated and sadly passed away. BJ didn't have the opportunity to visit him when he was initially admitted, but when she finally was able to see him a few days later, she could see the plaque on his teeth from across the room. She realized that he was clearly not receiving regular oral care from the medical staff, putting him at risk of developing aspiration pneumonia. She pleaded with the staff to not overlook this seemingly small detail. Unfortunately, BJ's father passed away days later. When I

asked BJ how she felt, she said that even though she can't be sure, she felt that her father's death could have been prevented had this one aspect of her father's care not been overlooked. She ended by telling me how every time she cares for one of her patients her father's story resonates within her, and is her inspiration.

As a future primary care physician, I'm not sure how many ICU patients I'll be directly caring for. However, BJ's story serves as a humble reminder that when it comes to patient care, no concern is insignificant. I think too often physicians can write off family members' concerns as being emotionally charged and not always in the best interest of the patient. However, we need to always remember that loved ones tend to know each other the best, and we need to acknowledge that truth as we handle patient care.

This elective has opened my eyes to the effect that proper oral care has on the quality of our lives. Oral care is often considered to be a complete separate entity when thinking about the practice of medicine, as evidenced by the little education we receive about oral care in medical school. However, by working with oral care specialists in various settings, I've learned about the basics of oral care, challenges related to the access to oral, and above all, how vital proper oral care is to overall health. I'm grateful that I can share the information I've learned with my future patients and colleagues.