

PLEXUS

A quarterly e-newsletter by the Primary Care Academy

Editorial Foreword

In this 1st quarterly Plexus e-bulletin, we wish all readers, good health, joy and success in 2025!

In conjunction with World Oral Health Day (20 March), we have yet another informative article entitled, ***"Doc, I'm already 75, teeth aren't my priority!"*** The article offers evidence-based pointers on why age is not an excuse to compromise on oral health.

The 2nd article unveils the impact of Medical Social Workers, who hand in hand with other Primary Healthcare Professionals, bridge key psycho-social needs of patients. The 2nd article simply titled, ***"Shall we talk"*** illustrates the impact of taking time to establish meaningful relationship- based conversations with patients.

*"They may forget your name
but they will never forget how
you make them feel."*

– Maya Angelou



*"Not all angels have wings,
some have scrubs!"*

– Author unknown

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Doc, I'm already 75, teeth aren't my priority!

*By: Dr Cheng Hoi Ting, Dental Surgeon, Hougang Polyclinic,
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Oral frailty in the elderly and its impact on their general health

* What is it and why does it matter?

The concept of **oral frailty** is defined as the “decline of oral function associated with aging”. The principle of age-related oral condition vulnerability and subsequent loss in function being accompanied by decreases in oral health, physical health and mental reserve capacity.

Diabetes is one example illustrating the link between general and oral health. The hyperglycemia in patients suffering from diabetes can affect the body's ability to manage pathogens and result in:

- ① **Fungal infections (oral thrush)**
- ② **Excessive plaque / tartar on teeth and periodontal disease**
- ③ **Salivary gland dysfunction / dry mouth which increases susceptibility to caries and even,**
- ④ **Neuropathy causing taste disturbances or burning mouth syndrome**

A 2016 study in Singapore found that only 9% of the population aged over 80 had at least 20 teeth¹ – the minimum number of teeth required to speak, chew and swallow well. With an aging population in Singapore, the loss of dentition is something we expect to see more often.

* Who is at risk?

The positive presence of any 2 criteria in the **Oral Frailty Five-item Checklist (OF-5) screening tool**², indicates oral frailty:

- ☐ <20 natural teeth
- ☐ Subjective difficulty in chewing
- ☐ Experiencing dry mouth
- ☐ Subjective difficulties swallowing
- ☐ Low articulatory oral motor skill (inability to repeat “ta” sound ≥ 6 times per second)

**However, note that this measure requires operator discernment or cultural adaptation as this sound may not be widely used in the Singapore population.*

* How can we help?

Healthcare providers and caregivers need to collaborate as a team, to encourage holistic health management by:



Emphasising the importance of regular dental visits for early detection of pathology, reducing incidence of caries and acquired tooth loss



Oral hygiene education from a young age



Medical management for systemic diseases and avoiding polypharmacy



Screenings for oral dryness



Diet and nutrition guidance



Shall we talk?

By: *Mr Elson Liew Yao Sin, Senior Medical Social Worker,
National Healthcare Group Polyclinics*



Jane (not a real name), a 13-year-old Sec 1 student, sat hesitantly in the consult room, looking like she would rather be somewhere else. Her mother was worried about her struggle with anxiety for the past 3 months, but she rarely talked about it. Jane had recently transitioned to a new school without her friends, and everything felt strange and unfamiliar to her. She felt all alone in the crowd; everyone had friends in school while she could not fit in. She believed that there was no one for her.



"How are you feeling right now, Jane?" asked the Medical Social Worker (MSW).

"I don't know," came her instinctive reply.

"It is perfectly okay not to have an answer. Maybe we can take a step together if you like, one at a time to find our answer," MSW replied with a warm smile.

As a MSW, I knew that was a sign that she was not ready to talk about her issues. Any more intrusive questions and she was going to withdraw further.



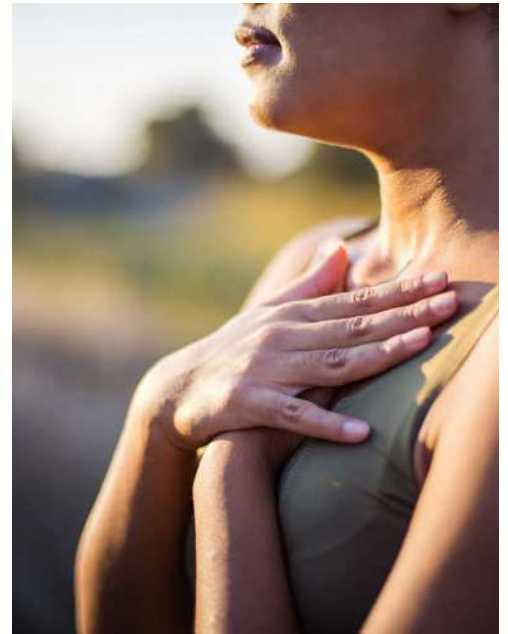
"What is your favourite food?"

"Oh, erm... I enjoy pasta."

She looked relieved and was less tense. It was a good start and we chatted a bit more. Gradually, with more sessions, the **"I don't know"** came up less often. Jane became more comfortable discussing her thoughts and worries.

She learnt to identify triggers for her uneasiness which affected her daily functioning and how she could cope with them with e.g. deep breathing techniques and mindfulness practice. She also gained insight about the interconnection between emotions and body sensations. Her confidence grew. She could interact casually and make small talk with her peers.

Positive adaptation to changes may not happen overnight. It is very common for patients to come in not knowing what they want, not having the language to express their thoughts and emotions, or perhaps fear of being labelled as a “problem child”. As MSWs, we seek to provide them with a safe and therapeutic space where they can share and work on their problems without fear of being judged. As always, patience and empathy work wonders.



Did You Know?



According to IMH survey (2024), **1 in 3 youth** in Singapore reported **very poor mental health**.¹



1 in 3 youth did not seek help, despite having severe or extremely severe symptoms.¹



Those who **chose not to seek help** said it was because they did not think specialists would be able to help them, or they were worried about what other people might think of them, or worry about privacy, confidentiality and having a permanent record of their condition.¹

PRIMARY CARE ACADEMY

Primary Care Academy (PCA) is a one-stop, regional training centre catering to the training needs and skills upgrading of primary care doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and ancillary staff in primary care. Besides, PCA also provides informative and interactive health talks and workshops for community/public and corporate audiences alike.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Life Support Courses



BCLS + AED Certification

4 Apr, 8 May & 11 Jun 2025
8.30am - 12.30pm,
2.00pm - 6.00pm



CPR (Hands-Only) + AED Certification

9 May 2025
2.00pm - 6.00pm



BCLS + AED Instructor

28 Jun 2025
8.30am - 5.30pm

Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic

For more information, visit
<https://for.sg/pcalifesupport>

Course fees apply. National Silver Academy (NSA) subsidies available & SkillsFuture credit claimable.



GDFM Mock Examination

24 May 2025
2.00pm - 6.00pm

Khatib Polyclinic



GDFM Procedural Workshop

21 Jun 2025
1:30pm - 5:30 pm

Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic

For more information, visit
<https://for.sg/gdfmmockexam25>
<https://for.sg/gdfmproceduralworkshop25>

PRACTICAL OBESITY MANAGEMENT SKILLS (POMS)



19, 26 Apr 2025, 1.30pm to 5pm
Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic

For more information, visit
<https://for.sg/poms25>

Health In A Nutshell Public Health Talk



23 Apr 2025, 1.00pm - 2.00pm
Reading Food Labels

For more information, visit
<https://for.sg/4m7xvd>

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At PCA, learning never stops.