ISSUE 23.2024

National Healthcare Group POLYCLINICS

Transforming PRIMARY & CARE

UP CLOSE WITH
A SENIOR DENTAL SURGEON SHARES THE MOST REWARDING ASPECTS OF HER JOB

IN AND AROUND
COLLABORATIONS FOR MENTAL WELLNESS, NHGP PRIMARY CARE SYMPOSIUM 2024, AND MORE



GOOD ORAL HYGIENE FOR HEALTHIER SMILES

Regular dental check-ups keep our teeth and gums healthy and contribute to our overall health. Find out more from NHGP Dental Services.

2023 APEX AWARDS FOR PUBLICATION EXCELLENCE



ACHIEVING OPTIMAL ORAL HEALTH

Good oral health is an important part of overall health, but it is often overlooked. Given the growing number of patients with chronic conditions due to an ageing population, preventing or delaying disease onset requires just as much attention as providing treatment and interventions do. As part of holistic dental care delivery, the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) places a strong emphasis on proper oral hygiene habits and the need for regular check-ups — especially for those living with chronic conditions — to help patients maintain general well-being and quality of life.

In this issue's cover story, 'The Importance of Good Oral Care for a Healthier Lifestyle', read about the relationship between oral and overall health, as well as NHGP's efforts in driving patient education, oral health literacy and preventive dental care in the primary care setting. Apart from routine dental care such as teeth cleaning, NHGP dentists assess and take into account any medical conditions or medications that a patient may be taking prior to dental treatment, for the patient's safety. This includes performing checks for patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure, to ensure their condition is stable prior to the dental procedures they will be undergoing. Working closely with other NHGP healthcare professionals and tertiary dental clinic partners, the team-based, person-centred approach adopted by NHGP's dental team creates a supportive environment of care for patients.

For an in-depth look at dental work through the eyes of an NHGP dentist, we speak to Dr Vivian Wong, Senior Dental Surgeon at Hougang Polyclinic in *Up Close With*. Dr Wong shares her inspiration for choosing this career path, and what her current role entails. She also reflects on the changing dynamics in the dental care landscape and patient profile over the years.

By fostering support for preventive health through health promotion and patient education, we will be able to help individuals practise good oral hygiene and, by extension, achieve healthier and happier lives.

The Editorial Team

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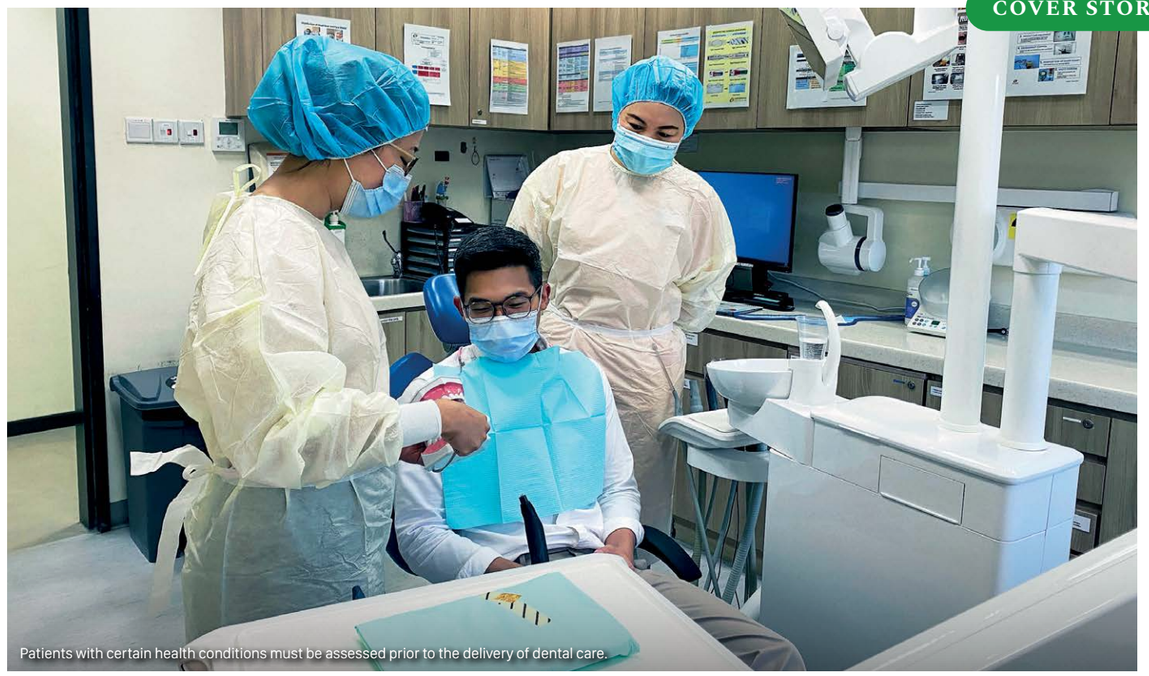
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Patients with certain health conditions must be assessed prior to the delivery of dental care.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD ORAL CARE FOR A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE

The National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) takes a person-centred approach to dental care with an emphasis on patient education, inculcation of good dental habits and comprehensive management of patients with chronic disease.

All too often, oral health is taken for granted and the dentist is seen only when toothache strikes. However — just as with one's overall health — regular dental check-ups are an important part of preventive health.

According to Dr Vivian Wong, Senior Dental Surgeon at Hougang Polyclinic, poor oral health has several far-reaching consequences. It can lead to tooth decay and gum disease — and in turn, wobbly teeth, tooth pain or tooth loss that will affect a person's overall well-being, nutritional intake and general health. "Some patients tell me they can now only eat porridge or puree, or they need to cut their food into small pieces to swallow," she shares, explaining that such dietary limitations increase the risk of malnutrition and fragility in older adults. Being unable to chew properly affects digestion and the absorption of nutrients, affecting their quality of life. Missing front teeth may also make patients feel self-conscious and avoid smiling.



PREVENTIVE DENTAL CARE COMES FIRST

Good oral health underscores the importance of preventive dental care at the primary care level. Dr Wong emphasises that regular visits to the dentist are essential to detect and treat oral issues early, because early detection typically provides a better chance for treatment. The check-ups also offer an opportunity for oral health education. This may involve giving advice on hygiene and eating habits, given that a risk factor for the development of cavities is sugary foods and drinks. "Many patients are unaware that bubble tea or coffee contain a lot of sugar, and this adds


Dr Vivian Wong sharing her observations with a patient.

> I always advise my patients to return for regular dental check-ups for the early detection and treatment of disease. This minimises the risk of the situation escalating to the point where a lot of treatment is required to alleviate symptoms.
>
> **Dr Vivian Wong**
> Senior Dental Surgeon at Hougang Polyclinic

up when they have several drinks throughout the day, increasing their risk of tooth decay," Dr Wong shares.

Dietary advice aside, NHGP dentists encourage patients to take charge of their oral health by demonstrating oral hygiene techniques that they can practise at home, such as toothbrushing, flossing and using interdental brushes to clean between teeth. The effectiveness of these techniques can be strengthened by using fluoride toothpaste with a concentration of at least 1000ppm (parts per million), which may reduce the chance of tooth decay, and even treat early decay.

"Improving patient oral health literacy and highlighting issues for awareness can contribute positively to one's overall health," says Dr Wong. Empowered with the knowledge they have received, patients are thus able to take the necessary steps to proactively maintain their teeth and prevent a cascade of tooth and gum issues.

A TEAM-BASED EFFORT IN DENTAL CARE

Beyond routine dental check-ups and procedures such as scaling and polishing, NHGP treats complex cases as well. Dr Wong notes that Singapore's ageing population and the rising prevalence of chronic disease mean that there are many cases that require more attention and multidisciplinary care. "A chronic condition will impact the patient's dental treatment," she says. "Those who have chronic illnesses may be at an increased risk for both oral complications and adverse health outcomes."

One example is diabetes. In Singapore, about 1 in 12 people aged 18 to 74 years old had diabetes mellitus according to the National Population Health Survey 2022 by the Ministry of Health and the Health Promotion Board[1]. People with diabetes are two to three times more susceptible to gum disease[2].

"There is a bidirectional relationship between diabetes and gum disease as inflammation arising from one condition can affect the other," Dr Wong explains. "Poorly-managed diabetes can increase the risk of gum disease due to increased inflammation in the gums. Likewise, gum disease can make it more difficult to control one's blood sugar levels." Diabetes also leads to poor healing after oral surgery or other dental procedures, and a higher risk of infection. This makes it even more important for people with diabetes to maintain excellent oral health. To lower the risk of complications, NHGP's dental team checks patients' blood sugar level control prior to carrying out elective procedures, and the patients may be referred to a tertiary dental clinic partner should there be a need for specialist intervention.

NHGP adopts the same meticulous approach for patients with other chronic diseases such as hypertension, taking into consideration their status when delivering dental care. Before starting dental treatment, their blood pressure is assessed. "If patients are found to have uncontrolled hypertension, we tend to defer elective treatment and usually advise them to see their doctors first and get their blood pressure to normal range before returning," Dr Wong elaborates.



A HOLISTIC CARE APPROACH

NHGP is committed to building a strong primary care ecosystem to support patient care. In addition to delivering person-centred, relationship-based care, patients with existing and pre-existing conditions must be well-managed to prevent additional complications. This extends to psychological issues, as the fear and anxiety associated with dental visits can add further stress to the patient. Dr Wong has seen cases when patients displayed heightened anxiety at their dental visits. One patient was so jumpy and agitated that Dr Wong stopped treatment halfway to find out about her background. She learnt that the patient was socially isolated and had a history of depression. With some encouragement, Dr Wong convinced the patient to seek psychological support via NHGP's Psychology Services.

Through addressing a person's physical and psychological health in dentistry, NHGP dentists provide holistic, accessible and continuous care. In embracing a person-centred approach to dental care, NHGP strives to create an environment where patients feel supported and capable of caring for themselves. Rapport-building goes a long way to encourage regular dental check-ups, which are a key contributor of preventive health. As Dr Wong puts it succinctly, "I always advise my patients to return for regular dental check-ups for the early detection and treatment of disease. This minimises the risk of the situation escalating to the point where a lot of treatment is required to alleviate symptoms."


Tooth decay and gum disease can be prevented from progressing through daily preventive care and techniques.

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DEALING WITH ORAL DISEASES

Oral diseases are among the most common non-communicable diseases, and are likely to become more prevalent due to population ageing. Two of these are cavities and gum disease.





CAVITIES are holes in the teeth that occur because of decay. When dental plaque — a sticky deposit that develops in part due to food consumed — forms in the mouth, it collects in the area where the teeth and gum meet. Foods that are sugary and high in carbohydrates tend to increase the build-up of plaque, and people with dry mouth or smokers are more prone to it as well.

The bacteria in plaque produces acid that sticks to and destroys the hard outer layer of the teeth (known as enamel), causing decay. Symptoms of cavities include a heightened sensitivity to hot, cold or sweet food and drinks, sudden pain especially at night, and a black shadow or tiny openings or holes appearing in a tooth.



GUM DISEASE, also known as periodontitis, is an infection that affects the surrounding gums and bone supporting the teeth, and may cause the gums to become red, swollen and bleed easily during the early stage (gingivitis). The inflammation could lead to serious infection and cause the gums and underlying bone to shrink away from the teeth. Teeth with little bone support could loosen and may even drop out.

Some chronic conditions such as diabetes or a weakened immune system — as well as poor oral hygiene and tobacco use — are risk factors for gum disease. Being a chronic and silent disease, the symptoms of gum disease tend to be obvious only when it is severe. By the time these symptoms are visibly present such as shaky teeth or teeth shifting from their original position, the gum disease would have progressed to an advanced stage.

With a focus on health promotion and disease prevention, NHGP aims to help patients maintain healthy gums and teeth through the provision of dental services. These services range from basic services such as routine scaling and polishing, topical fluoride application, fillings and teeth extraction, to intermediate services such as dentures, crowns, root canal treatment and the surgical removal of wisdom teeth.

For more information, visit https://www.nhgp.com.sg/our-services/Pages/dental-services.aspx.

COLLABORATIONS FOR MENTAL WELLNESS

On 16 January 2024, NHGP Health Promotion and Preventive Care Department, and the Mental Health Specialty Advisory Group had a fruitful discussion with leaders from REACH Community Care Services to explore opportunities to collaborate and support mental well-being in the community. Through the collaboration, the teams aimed to continue implementing strategies to address topics such as youth at risk, premarital and marital conflicts, and community-based counselling.





On 14 February 2024, NHGP's ALERT (AdoLescent Evaluation and Rapid Treatment) team and Volunteer Corporate Office marked a five-month collaboration — aimed at creating multimedia products to improve awareness of mental health among youths — with students from Nanyang Polytechnic's (NYP) School of Engineering. The students had created the products with their peers' mental well-being in mind. The final products of this collaboration were showcased to NHGP at the NYP Diploma in Infocomm & Media Engineering (DIME) end-semester event.

CN-PCN QUARTERLY MEETING CUM LUNAR NEW YEAR CELEBRATION



Held on 17 February 2024, the Central-North Primary Care Network's (CN-PCN) first quarterly meeting of the year — which also marked the celebration of the Lunar New Year — was attended by General Practitioner (GP) partners and leadership representatives from NHG and NHGP. At the event, Dr Christopher Chong, who took over as CN-PCN Admin Lead from Dr Gowri Doraisamy, presented her with a bouquet as a gesture of appreciation for her contributions. Besides listening to a Continuing Medical Education (CME) talk on 'Improving Outcomes in Diabetic Kidney Disease: Current and Future Outlook', the GPs heard from Dr Eng Soo Kiang, Clinical Lead, CN-PCN, on upcoming clinic improvement initiatives, and CN-PCN Admin on the new service model for diabetic retinal photography and diabetic foot screening services at community nodes, as well as the launch of spirometry services from March 2024.

RECRUITMENT OUTREACH EVENTS FOR NURSING

In January 2024, NHGP's Nursing Services and Human Resource Department jointly participated in several outreach events for networking and the exploration of sponsorship and career opportunities within NHG. The events included the NHG Nursing Open House, which took place at the Centre for Healthcare Innovation; Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Nanyang Polytechnic's Open House; and NUS ALCNS (National University of Singapore Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies) event. These events provided students with insights into the work of NHG.



VISITS BY OVERSEAS DELEGATIONS TO SEMBAWANG POLYCLINIC

Professor Catherine Calderwood, Professor of Practice at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland and other members of the University, visited Sembawang Polyclinic, NHGP's latest polyclinic, on 6 March 2024. Led by Dr Irwin Chung, Head, Sembawang Polyclinic, the delegation toured the polyclinic and learned about its partnership plans with co-located agencies in Bukit Canberra. Dr Lim Chee Kong, Director, Clinical Services; and Associate Professor Tang Wern Ee, Director, Clinical Research Unit, shared more about the primary care model in Singapore, services provided by NHGP and NHGP's ongoing research initiatives. The visit fostered mutual learning as it also enabled NHGP to gain insights into Scotland's primary care practices, and paved the way for potential research collaborations.





On 18 March 2024, Dr Teodoro Herbosa, Secretary of Health, and delegates from the Department of Health, Philippines, visited Sembawang Polyclinic, where they learned about NHGP's Teamlet Care Model and the self-service initiatives to improve efficiency within the clinic. Dr Karen Ng, Chief Executive Officer, NHGP, also shared about primary care perspectives and strategies in a discussion involving knowledge-exchange between Singapore and the Philippines.

NHGP PRIMARY CARE SYMPOSIUM 2024

Titled 'Unlocking Diabetes Remission', the NHGP Primary Care Symposium on 2 March 2024 featured Associate Professor Tang Wern Ee, NHGP's Director of Clinical Research Unit and Information Management & Analytics, who shared about the NHG Diabetes Reversal Programme. The symposium, which also featured other distinguished speakers, provided a platform to share research findings and updates on diabetes remission in Singapore and the United Kingdom.





BRINGING SMILES BACK TO FACES

Dr Vivian Wong, Senior Dental Surgeon, Hougang Polyclinic, shares the most rewarding aspects of being a dentist – from the skills involved and the personalised care, to achieving pain-free treatment for patients.



Dr Vivian Wong
Senior Dental Surgeon, Hougang Polyclinic

What inspired you to join dentistry?

When I was a teenager, I had the opportunity to experience job-shadowing at various dental clinics, which piqued my curiosity and inspired me to become a dental assistant, and subsequently to pursue my degree in dentistry. Dentistry involves working with a human touch, and I consider it to be as much art as it is science. It resembles sculpture because we work with shape, form and colour — such as when we do tooth reshaping for crowns. Many required skills are acquired through hands-on exposure and cannot be learnt from a textbook. I enjoy the practical nature of it.

To me, the practice of dentistry is also a personalised form of patient care. Every individual tooth and mouth is different, and we are attuned to patient feedback to ensure that patients are comfortable with their new filling, crown or denture.

What is your current job scope like?

I divide my time between patient care and mentoring junior dentists. In my role as supervisor and mentor, I oversee and guide the dentists in intermediate dental work such as crowns, bridges, dentures and root canal treatments. This helps them gain more confidence and competency in doing more complex treatments.

The mentorship period can be quite long as the work for a denture or crown, for instance, involves multiple steps and takes place over many months. Each patient case has to be followed up from start to end. I train the dentists in the development of comprehensive care plans, which includes making sure that a patient's oral health is good beforehand. To achieve this, we iron out the basic treatment first to help patients be free of disease and stabilise their oral health before any prosthesis can be placed. When patients are aware of what they need to do for better oral health, they will be able to maintain good dental habits — and their denture or crown — in the long term. Such training equips the dentists with patient-centred skills and knowledge on assessing patients beyond their oral health status. This in turn contributes to the dentists' ability to manage patients with chronic illness.

> "When patients express happiness after their treatment or tell me that they can eat properly and enjoy their meals again, I feel a sense of achievement. It is heartening to know that the treatment has helped them regain their quality of life.



How has dentistry at the primary care level evolved over time?

As Singapore's population ages, I am seeing more geriatric patients and larger proportion of denture treatment work. I also see more cases of patients with comorbidities such as diabetes and hypertension as well as polypharmacy (prescribed with multiple medications). With the primary care sector continuing to maintain a strong focus on preventive health, our ongoing work in preventive dental care aligns with this focus and contributes to the national *Healthier SG* initiative.

What motivates or inspires you at work?

When patients express happiness after their treatment or tell me that they can eat properly and enjoy their meals again, I feel a sense of achievement. It is heartening to know that the treatment has helped them regain their quality of life. In addition, patients having a phobia of dentists is quite common. When I am able to make them feel at ease in the dental chair and they mention that they would like to continue their care with me, it always feels rewarding. It is a beautiful transformation when patients who receive treatment change their mannerisms, and the way they talk and carry themselves. Some of them were reluctant to show their teeth or smile when they first entered the room. But by the end of the treatment, they flash me a big grin — which is priceless.