

MOUTHING OFF

DR. SAMAHA TALKS ABOUT HER FIRM BELIEF THAT HEALTHY GUMS CAN HELP PREVENT MANY MEDICAL PROBLEMS

By Karen Haywood Queen



“I’ve heard since I was a little child that any disease in our mouth affects every organ system in the body.

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Dentist Lisa Marie Samaha has been speaking passionately for years to patients, other dentists and her medical colleagues about the link between a healthy mouth and a healthy body.

As a 5-year-old, she listened in rapt attention as her periodontist father, Dr. Francis J. Samaha, talked about the importance of healthy gums to overall health. As a 12-year-old, she won first place in her local science fair and an honorable mention in the Maryland State Fair with a presentation on the causes and effects of gum disease. Samaha, who avidly read her dad’s dental journals, even has a picture of herself presenting a lecture to her younger brother—now a physician—complete with a pointer to emphasize her words.

“I’ve heard since I was a little child that any disease in our mouth affects every organ system in the body. By the age of 5 or 6, I was absolutely fascinated with this concept,” says Samaha of Port Warwick Dental Arts in Newport News, the 22nd practice worldwide to earn a designation as a Center for Dental Medicine.

Back in the 1960s, little research backed up her father’s assertions. But his counsel to patients likely improved their health and perhaps even prolonged their lives. Since the 1990s, extensive medical research has proven his theories by demonstrating links between gum disease and pre-term births and other danger-

ous pregnancy outcomes, infertility, heart attacks, strokes, high blood pressure, diabetes, certain cancers, lung disease, arthritis and other systemic complications.

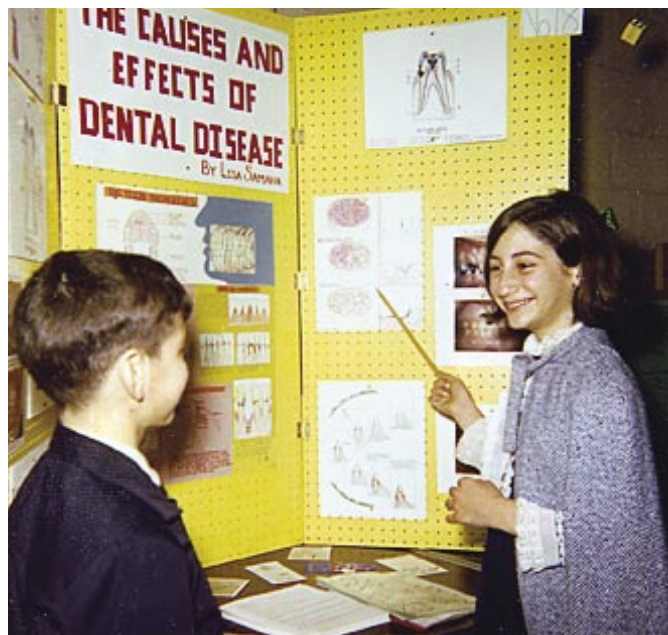
Consider diabetes. According to studies done by the American Academy of Periodontology, the rate of gum disease in diabetics is twice the rate in the non-diabetic population. And at least one study shows that diabetics with gum disease are more likely to die prematurely. The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases monitored 628 type II (adult-onset) diabetics for an average of 11 years.

During the study, 204 people died. The age-adjusted death rates were 3.7 percent for those with mild or no periodontal disease, 19.6 percent for moderate periodontal disease and 28.4 percent for severe periodontal disease. The main causes of death were heart attacks and kidney disease.

As spokesperson for The Centers for Dental Medicine, Samaha has an international platform to get her message out—both to physicians and to her fellow dentists. She offers complimentary, ongoing monthly seminars at her practice as a resource for local medical professionals and is working to establish a non-profit foundation to help fund research and further publicize the issue.

“I clearly believe this is my life’s mission,” Samaha says.

She says it is crucial for people to see their dentist at least twice a year in addition to regular



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physician visits. Her vision is a two-way street of referrals. Dentists would refer patients with gum disease to their physicians for further evaluation, and physicians would refer their patients who have conditions that can be worsened by gum disease to a dentist for regular dental care.

Earlier this year, the American Dental Association and the American Medical Association launched an initiative to help spread the word about the importance of oral care in general health care.

Samaha envisions a day when patients diagnosed with gum disease will receive an accurate finger-stick blood test at their dentist’s office. The test will determine if these patients are at risk for heart attack, stroke or diabetes—three major killers that can be caused or worsened by gum disease. The dentist would begin treatment for gum disease and then refer those patients, with the results of their tests, to their physicians for further evaluations.

Samaha has been doing these blood tests in her practice since early 2005. One patient’s blood levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), an indicator of future heart attack or stroke, were lowered by 300 percent within two months simply with non-surgical treatment for periodontal disease, which includes laser therapy and taking special pharmaceutical-grade nutrients designed for use in periodontal therapy.

“We are finding on a daily basis evidence of medical conditions that our patients and their physicians were unaware of,” Samaha says. “I believe that within 10 years, if not sooner, blood testing in dental offices will become the standard of care for all periodontal patients.”

Overall, Samaha is hopeful. After decades of listening to her father preach the message, and then continuing to spread the word herself, she’s no longer so alone at the pulpit.

“In the past few years, there’s been an overwhelming amount of research and published literature showing the connection between acute and chronic oral infections and various systemic conditions,” she says. “The winds of the medical, dental and legal standards of care are starting to shift to include multi-disciplinary management of compromising health conditions.” **HR**

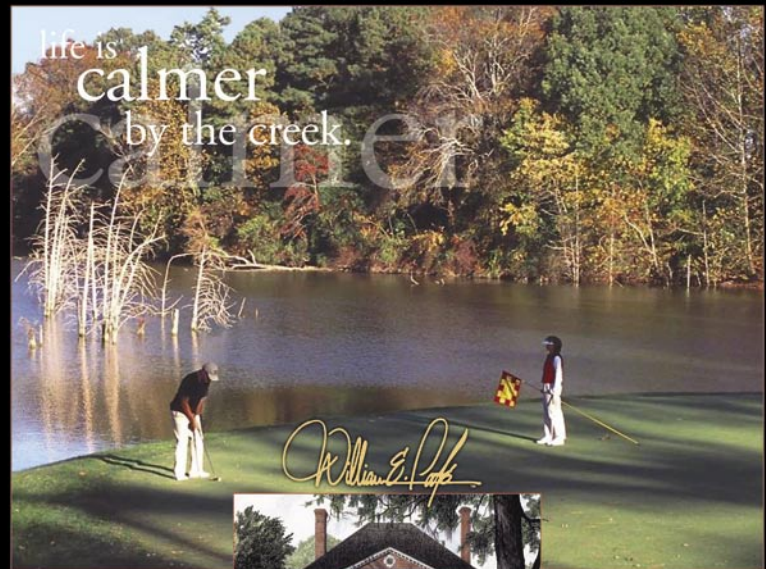
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