

Six Steps to Advance Oral Health Literacy

AGD2017 Session Explores the Importance of Educating Your Patients

Held Friday, July 14, during the Scientific Session, AGD emeritus member and longtime advocacy champion Myron J. Bromberg, DDS, moderated the session, “Oral Health Literacy Awareness, a National Healthcare Priority.”

Upon taking the stage, Bromberg shared the American Dental Association’s definition of oral health literacy — “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate oral health decisions,” supported by AGD policy. Bromberg went on to outline the current state of oral health, as well as the role of oral health literacy in society.

“This effort is greater than all of us, but each of us can play a significant role,” he said. “When one truly understands the importance of oral health, he or she acts upon it, and action, in turn, becomes engrained as value. This concept — known as patient activation — is the unspoken solution to improving oral health. Unfortunately, studies have shown that education alone does not translate to value that leads to patient activation and positive patient outcomes. Education must be coupled with action; specifically, health promotional activities to ultimately result in patients’ realizing and acting upon their need for preventive care, both through self-care at home and through regular visits to their dentist.”

Panelists Ralph A. Cooley, DDS, FAGD, and Rocky L. Napier, DMD, joined Bromberg in offering attendees the following six pieces of advice for advancing oral health literacy:

1. Spend time talking with your patients about the importance of taking care of their teeth, including how to floss and brush correctly, as well as the importance of regular checkups.

2. Emphasize the connection between good oral health and good overall health.

3. Emphasize that oral health care should start young, even before birth. Talk to pregnant women about the importance of periodontal care for a healthy pregnancy, and the importance of bringing their baby into the dental office for visits before the age of 1, in order for their son or daughter to have the best chance of having a lifetime of healthy teeth. “As a pediatric dentist, I’d like to [emphasize] the importance of the age 1 dental visit,” Napier said. “Prevention starts before childbirth.”

4. Talk about fluoridation and dissuade any unfounded fears that patients may have about fluoride. Community water fluoridation has done more to prevent caries than any public health effort, and the only side effect is the possibility of some staining known as fluorosis.

5. Take the time to find out about your patient’s primary care physician, a pregnant woman’s obstetrician or a child’s pediatrician, and with the patient’s permission, make the effort to work with the physicians to make sure regular oral health checkups stay on the forefront of the patient’s mind.

6. If you get the opportunity, speak with your legislators and local representatives about the importance of oral health to overall health; specifically, the importance of preventive oral health care to reducing health care costs in the United States.

“These may seem like obvious steps you can take every day, but the truth is that we all get busy,” Bromberg said. “Our office lives and home lives can get in the way; our need to meet quotas and satisfy a bottom line can also get in the way. However, you *need* to do these things.”



Bromberg moderates the oral health literacy panel discussion.



Cooley (left) and Napier (right) address attendees Friday, July 14, during AGD2017 in Las Vegas.