



The bite on veterinary dentistry

In the bad old days dentists had a reputation for drilling, filling and billing. I know because as a British post-war baby growing up in the fifties and sixties I suffered the pain and taste of rotten teeth. In fact my sisters and I were well known to the dentist and we each have a mouth full of fillings to prove it. Never once do I remember him commenting on a suitable diet or the need for preventive brushing and flossing. Now forty years later children enjoy good dental health with fewer visits to the dentist. Reduced health care costs benefit the community and the dental profession has shrunk — in size but not in stature.

So what differs between then and now? Sugary diets are much the same and the dentist's drill still makes the familiar whine. At one level the answer would be fluoridation of the water supply, along with increased awareness of the benefits of brushing and flossing. With these changes dental caries has become a rarity and gum disease, though still prevalent, is lessened. But such an answer, while true, overlooks what I believe to be the essential difference, namely the *committed change in attitude* by the dental profession. Guided by their conscience dentists recognised that *prevention*, not treatment or their own financial interest, should govern their approach. In 1996 Patrick Dalton, President of the Australian Dental Association, looked back over the preceding few decades with justifiable pride:

Our focus has always been prevention rather than treatment. In many instances treatment indicates failure of prevention. The dental profession is a very visible leader among the health professions in the philosophy and practice of prevention. While the major battles for fluoridation may not be remembered by