

A good foundation for dental health

Etain Kett explains the work of the Dental Health Foundation

Established in the late 1990s as an independent body, and funded by the Department of Health and Children and the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Dental Health Foundation (DHF) has a vision to build a nation of healthy and happy people by reinforcing the message that good oral health is of vital

importance to the general health of everyone in Ireland.

DHF has come a long way, making significant contributions in promoting oral health awareness and the reinforcement of good dental habits in Ireland.

The DHF mission statement is: 'To promote oral health in Ireland,

by providing effective resources and interventions and by influencing policy through a multi-sectoral, partnership approach.'

DHF has extensive expertise in the area of oral health promotion; it has developed a work programme in line with the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, which will deliver significant value in terms of focused oral health promotion and state expenditure, as well as a significant contribution to improved oral health in Ireland.

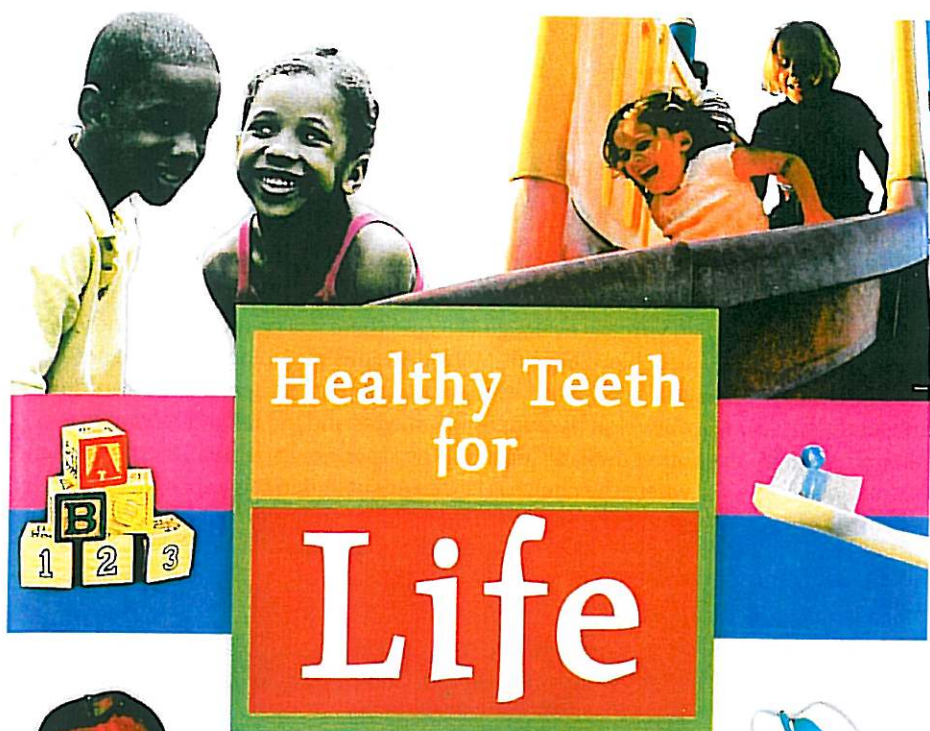
DHF implements programmes that specifically reach out to children, the elderly and those with special needs. We are all familiar with the saying that 'prevention is better than cure'. A good dental regime to prevent oral diseases should be a lifelong practice and there is no better time to form good dental habits than during a child's developing years.

Recognising the importance of this, DHF has already established a variety of oral health education programmes designed to highlight the causes, consequences and prevention of tooth decay. These programmes include Mighty Mouth and Winning Smiles.

Successful results

These initiatives have yielded results. Following the Mighty Mouth intervention programme, significant differences were observed in the oral health knowledge and behaviour of children. A positive increase was observed in the number of children reporting their parents brushed their teeth. Significantly more children reported using a pea-sized amount of toothpaste after the programme, and the number of children who reported brushing their teeth in the morning and before going to bed increased. While a

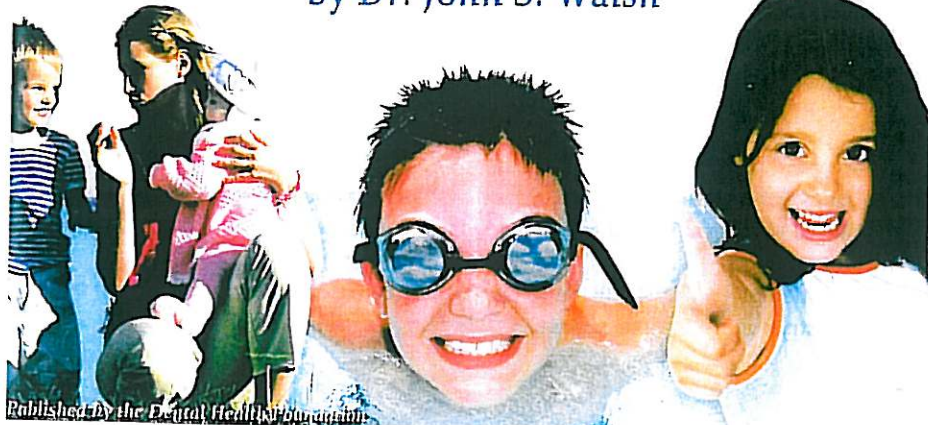
The publication 'Healthy Teeth for Life' by Dr John S Walsh and published by the Dental Health Foundation exemplifies the oral health strategy



A guide for your child's dental health

(2nd Edition)

by Dr. John S. Walsh



high proportion of children knew that sweets were bad for their teeth, this increased significantly following the Mighty Mouth programme.

Meanwhile, the findings of the Winning Smiles Programme represent a major advance in monitoring the effectiveness of oral health promotion, because they support the validity of using the equilibrium salivary fluoride level as an objective measure of compliance with increasing frequency of toothpaste use.

New programmes will also be launched over the coming years to address oral health concerns among the community.

More to be done

We have seen a marked improvement in the oral health standards of children in Ireland over the years, as revealed in the 2002 North South Survey of Children's Oral Health, with decay levels much lower in 2002 than they were in 1984. However, children in the Republic of Ireland have among the highest frequency of consumption of foods and drinks sweetened with sugar when compared with 34 other countries (World Health Organization statistics).

Ireland also has high levels of inequality in 'healthy eating' (Report Card 9: *The Children Left Behind*, UNICEF 2010). Thirty-one percent of five year olds consume sweet food or drinks between meals twice a day and less than half of five year olds brush their teeth twice a day – these are worrying trends.

There is therefore more to be done. Improving the oral health of the entire population, young and old alike, is a collaborative effort – individuals, parents, caregivers, school teachers and health professionals have an important role to play in ensuring optimal oral health and the DHF is committed to helping them do so.

Award-winning ideas

The DHF sponsors the Excellence in Practice Awards, which recognise outstanding efforts in oral health improvement. Winning an award can energise oral health programmes and get recognition in-house, in the community and nationally among peers. It can also be a great way to learn and network with other healthcare professionals.

The Moloney Award was established in 2003 and is presented at the Irish Dental Association's annual scientific conference. A key requirement of the judging criteria is that each demonstration presents a practical component applicable to general dental practice

The Dental Health Foundation also sponsors the Irish Society for Disability and Oral Health 2011 Awards including:

- Annual Special Care Dentistry Award – €300 is awarded to the best essay, case report or completed project on any aspect of special care dentistry
- Annual Special Care Dental Care Professional (DCP) Award – €300 is awarded to the best essay, case report or completed project on any aspect of special care dentistry by a dental nurse, hygienist, oral health promoter or other non-dental healthcare professional.

For details of the awards and how to apply, visit www.dentalhealth.ie.

On course

The Dental Health Foundation, in collaboration with Dr Mary O'Farrell, Principal Dental Surgeon, and the National University of Ireland Galway, delivers a Specialist Certificate in Health Promotion (Oral Health) course annually.

The course is aimed at those working in a professional capacity in oral health, e.g. dental nurses, dental hygienists, dentists and/or those promoting oral health.

The 12-month, part-time course aims to provide participants with professional

education and training in the principles and practice of oral health promotion.

A wealth of information

There is a range of over 30 oral health resources produced by DHF and other bodies, including leaflets, models and posters, available at www.dentalhealth.ie. This is a selection of current, high-quality resources aimed at improving the quality of oral health for infants, children, adolescents, the elderly and people with special needs. They can be used by health professionals, educators and policymakers to learn more about oral health, for programme development, and to provide information to answer specific questions.

Recently, the Dental Health Foundation, in partnership with an enthusiastic group of mouth cancer survivors and health professionals, collaborated in a new venture to raise awareness of mouth, head and neck cancer in Ireland. A leaflet was developed with the support of the Irish Cancer Society and funded by DHF. The leaflet is available for download in the DHF website's publications section.

The Dental Health Foundation has, since its establishment, been at the forefront of oral health promotion in Ireland. Its *Strategic Plan 2008-2012* sets out a practical integrated programme of work for effective oral health promotion.

In pursuing these goals, the Foundation will continue to work closely with its key stakeholders, i.e. the Department of Health and Children, the HSE, the Irish Expert Body on Fluorides and Health, its Board of Trustees and staff, the Foundation's Advisory Committee, health professionals and relevant agencies, the general public, consumer groups and the commercial sector. ■

Etain Kett is senior quality and oral health officer at the Dental Health Foundation, Ireland – www.dentalhealth.ie.

GAST GROUP

GAST GROUP LTD
A Unit of IDEX Corporation
www.jun-air.com
Phone: +44 (0)1527 504040
Telefax: +44 (0)1527 525262
E-mail: gastgroup.uk@idexcorp.com

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