

## EXTRA-ORAL DIAGNOSIS: *THE FORGOTTEN ART.*

The distinction between medicine and dentistry is purely arbitrary. The oral cavity, after all is simply one end of the digestive tract. It does, of course, contain some specialized structures, namely the teeth and periodontium, which keep the vast majority of our profession engaged for the vast majority of their working lives. That is not to say that the rest of the mouth can be ignored, since a number of systemic “*medical*” diseases, which may be very serious, can present initially in the mouth. For example, seventy per cent of patients with pemphigus vulgaris, a mucocutaneous disease which is lethal unless treated, will develop oral lesions as the first manifestation of their disease

### **The Holistic Approach**

Increasingly, the skills in modern practical dentistry are technology-driven. Dental students must be taught these skills for the benefit of their patients. But the purely technical skill is not enough. In dental schools, currently, we teach an *holistic* approach. Patients are not merely sets of teeth and gums to be treated, but complex individuals with their own medical, familial, psycho-social and biological peculiarities. We are all aware that performing even the most simple task, such as an occlusal restoration, can be extremely difficult in some patients and child’s play in others. Patients with the same medical conditions also show considerable individual variation. Oral lichen planus is a very common condition affecting, perhaps 1-2% of the population in the western world. Some patients with this condition may have it for many decades and rarely, if ever need treatment. For a subset of others the disease is always symptomatic, very debilitating, has a profound effect on their lives and requires large doses of systemic immunosuppressants to control the disease. In the most unfortunate few, malignancy develops.

At the last count there were over 400 systemic diseases with oral manifestations, and by definition, these diseases will affect other parts of the body. Although it is inappropriate to undress our patients in the dental surgery, nonetheless it is possible to glean diagnostic information from those parts of the body, which are available to us: the general demeanour, habitus, and movement of the patient, together with the hands, the neck, eyes, facial and the perioral structures which can predict the intra-oral findings. Conversely, oral clinical signs can predict systemic disease. Anaemia is one example, xerostomia another. Furthermore, early diagnosis and early treatment may have a profound impact on the progression of a disease process and the prognosis of the patient. As the health care professionals who know more about the mouth than any others, it is therefore our duty to stay aware in this field. We have all seen that moment when a doctor asks the patient to protrude their tongue and say Aaahhhh. As a doctor myself, I can tell you that although we are taught to notice the dorsum of the tongue, we are mostly looking to see if the palate moves symmetrically, as part of a cranial nerve examination!

### **The Lost Art of Inspection**

How then are we to make these diagnoses to the benefit of our patients? The history can be critical, as in the pain syndromes, where there are few or no clinical signs. However, the art of inspection is the lost art in oral diagnosis and it is so easy for the mouth. A good light source and a mirror are all that is required. No bronchoscopes, gastroscopes, nasendoscopes or other scopes.

Sir William Osler, the Canadian-born, quintessential holistic physician, who practiced at the turn of the previous century variously in McGill, Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins and Oxford and from whom a phenomenon, a manouvre, a parasitic nematode, a trematode, two syndromes, two diseases, some nodules and a bibliotheca all bear his eponym, summed it up by writing, “the mouth is the mirror of the body”. But he also very wisely stated “what the brain does not know, the eye cannot see.” He, after all, practiced in an era when MRI’s, CT scans, complex immunological, haematological, biochemical and even genetic diagnostic tests were not available and so the art of observation and interpretation of clinical signs was the diagnosticians’ most powerful weapon.

A picture tells a thousand words. The purpose of my lecture, therefore, was to illustrate pictorially, the clinical extra-oral signs, which, with correct interpretation can predict intra-oral findings. Furthermore, I stressed the importance of a systematic oral examination to detect intra-oral signs, which might predict systemic disease.

*Hopefully, then, the next time those Fellows present in the audience encounter these signs..... the eye will see, because the brain knows.*

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Suggested Further Reading:

**Oral Diseases: an illustrated guide to diagnosis and management, 2nd edition**  
*Crispian Scully, Stephen Flint, [Stephen Porter](#)*

Published by Taylor and Francis: A Martin Dunitz (London) Book  
<http://www.dunitz.co.uk/>

Also published in Portuguese, as Atlas Colorido de Doencas da Boca, German, as Erkrankungen der Mundhole and Farbatlas der Stomatologie and French, as Maladies de la Bouche. An American spelling version is also available.

**Oral and Maxillofacial Diseases. An illustrated guide to diagnosis and management of diseases of the oral mucosa, teeth, salivary glands bones and joints.**

*Crispian Scully, Stephen Flint, Stephen Porter and Kirsheed Moos*

Published by Taylor and Francis: A Martin Dunitz (London) Book

<http://www.dunitz.co.uk/>

**Related Web-sites:**

Trinity College Dublin, Continuing Dental Education: Part-Time Diploma Course

<http://global.dental.tcd.ie/Education/ContinuingDentalEducation/Part-timeDiplomaCourse/>

Trinity College Dublin, Continuing Dental Education: Evening Lecture Series.

<http://global.dental.tcd.ie/Education/ContinuingDentalEducation/EveningLectureCourse/>

The National Disease Surveillance Centre

<http://www.ndsc.ie/WorkingGroups/ScientificAdvisoryCommitteeSACandSub-Committees/>

Postgraduate Medical and Dental Board

<http://www.pgmdb.ie/misc/accreditation.tmpl>

Promotes the co-ordination of Postgraduate Medical and Dental Training in Ireland, and provides advice and assistance to Junior Doctors and Dentists wishing to pursue postgraduate training in Ireland.

Irish Medicines Board

<http://www.imb.ie>