

A healthy smile

By Carol Latter

When medical issues crop up, a trip to an oral and maxillofacial surgeon may be the quickest route back to good health

■ A great smile can mean different things to different people. For some, it's straight teeth; for others, a whiter smile.

For those needing the services of an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, however, the problems can run much deeper.

"We see a really broad range of patient problems," said Dr. David Shafer, DMD, an associate professor and chair of the division of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery at the UConn School of Dental Medicine in Farmington.

"Often, people will have toothaches that have progressed to an abscess or infection. It can be anywhere from the teeth to the jaw to the neck. And potentially, it can start closing off your airway."

Despite the serious consequences that can result from procrastinating about seeing a dentist, many people put off making an appointment. The reasons are many. They may tell themselves that their symptoms are "no big deal," or they simply may not have the money to pay for dental care.

"It's a big problem nowadays, because many

people can't afford dental insurance or care – or they can't obtain dental care because they can't get time off of work. Or they could be afraid of going to the dentist. So then they come in with these very bad infections."

Waiting to seek treatment "can lead to bigger problems," like the loss of teeth. Beyond decayed or infected teeth, Dr. Shafer sees patients with cysts and tumors of the jaw. "And we treat people who come in with jaw deformities – either congenital things or deformities from tumors or trauma injuries."

Dr. Shafer, who is also associate chief of staff and clinical chief of the Department of Dentistry at John Dempsey Hospital, treats both adults and children – including young patients at Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford, where he serves as chair of the hospital's Division of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery.

For adults, treatment options may include routine extractions; dental implant surgery for people who lose their teeth; bone grafting to build up the jaw so that dental implants can be placed; and surgery to correct painful temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders. The temporomandibular joint is located where the lower jawbone meets the skull, and allows people to talk, yawn and chew.

"Typically, the things we see in kids are cavities that lead to infections, facial deformities, jaw deformities. We do orthognathic surgery, where we move the jaws into a more normal position, typically in combination with orthodontics. Then we'll do things like repair cleft lips and palates."

Dr. Shafer said referrals to his department often come from general dentists and orthodontics, but medical doctors as well. "We also work a lot with other dental specialists like periodontists and prosthodontists."

He encourages people to make regular dental care a priority, "and certainly if they have pain in their jaw or mouth, they shouldn't ignore it or put off calling a dentist because of fear or anxiety."

He said these days, dentists have access to a wide range of relaxation techniques and technologies to make dental procedures more tolerable and, in many cases, pain-free.

The most important thing, he emphasized, is for people to take the necessary steps to preserve both their teeth and their health. Beyond that, he added, "We lead with our faces when we walk out into the real world, and people frequently want their face looking as good as it can be." **HM**

Dr. David Shafer sees patients with a wide variety of problems.

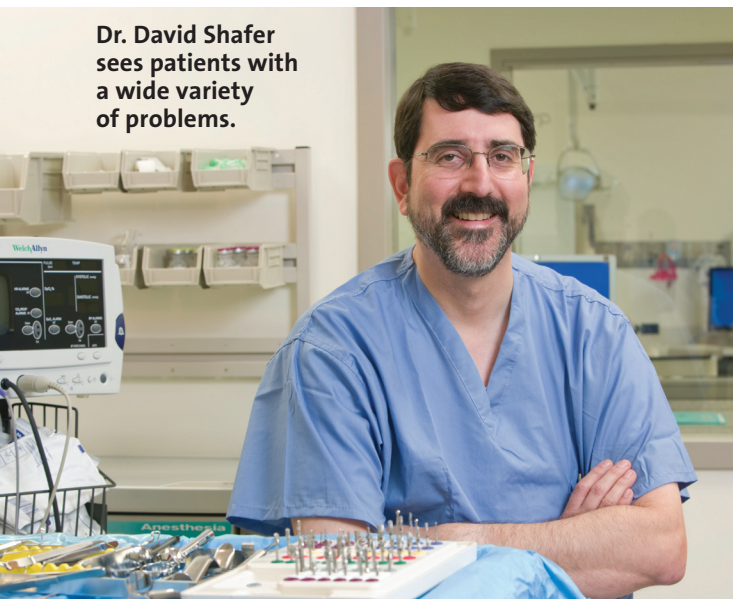


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