

Out of practice causes death of practice Are you prepared for an emergency?

By David Goodman

A case study: Background

A 22-year-old male has arrived at your practice for his first dental hygiene appointment. While gathering a history he mentions that he tends to feel “anxious” whenever he visits the dentist office. “My heart often races and I become dizzy and short of breath when I’m under stress or frightened,” he explains.

You ask if he’s fainted before to which he replies: “It’s happened once, many years ago but not since then.” You tell him that you need to take x-rays; it’s at this moment you witness his face turn pale. He tells you his “heart is beating through his chest” and that he feels dizzy. He passes out. He’s unconscious, unresponsive and gray but thankfully only for a few seconds. You call the dentist into your operatory to help assess the client.

Assessment and treatment

The client has now regained consciousness. He’s embarrassed and scared but is alert and oriented. His heart rate is 140 beats/min., blood pressure is 90/50, respiratory rate is 24 breaths/min. and his colour is almost back to normal. You are unable to obtain his blood sugar because your office isn’t equipped with a blood glucometer. You position him supine, legs elevated and place him on oxygen for 10 minutes.

Upon reassessment, he is no longer experiencing an elevated heart rate and his vital signs are back to normal. The dentist advises you to continue with the appointment and that it’s not necessary to call 911. The client drives himself home 45 minutes after his fainting spell.

The incident follow-up

Three days after this incident you receive a phone call from his mother; she asks to speak with you directly. She is barely able to talk, her voice sounds empty and filled with sorrow. She tells you her son passed away that he went into cardiac arrest while watching TV and couldn’t be resuscitated.

She asks you if anything unusual happened during his dental hygiene appointment. Immediately you feel flushed, your stomach sinks and you become queasy.

You think of your own son who is just six years old. You ask the mother what day her son passed and she calmly tells you three days ago, eight hours after his dental hygiene appointment. You go numb.

If you are puzzled and wondering what the cause of death was, this young client had an undiagnosed and insidious cardiac arrhythmia (Sudden Arrhythmia Death Syndrome) and the syncopal episode was a warning sign that was sadly dismissed. If treated properly, that is, if staff had called 911, he may have been saved.

Syncopal episode is the most common dental office medical emergency and can often provide a clue to other serious medical conditions, waiting within and ready to strike at any moment. In my years working as a paramedic and providing in-office CPR instruction, I have found the majority of dental offices handle these



emergencies in an incompetent and unsafe manner.

I invite you to join me at the ODHA Re-energize Conference on Sept. 23 and 24 for my 90-minute session on Preparing for Medical Emergencies presented on both Friday and Saturday. It will be informative and instructional as I help you through prevention and protection strategies your office needs to employ. I will also discuss the most common medical emergencies in a dental office, the medications used to treat them, as well as provincial legislation/liabilities, and improving safety for the practitioner and the client.

According to the Canadian Dental Association, in Ontario approximately 1,400-3,265 dental practices will experience an in-office medical emergency in any given year.

In the end, it’s a son, a daughter, a wife, a husband or a friend who ends up suffering. As health-care professionals, you owe it to your clients and yourself to not only provide the best oral care possible but also the best medical care when emergencies strike.

Dental hygienists see and treat more than 13 million clients a year. It’s not a matter of “if” a medical emergency will strike; it’s a matter of “when.” Will you be prepared?

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Learn more about
**Preparing
for Medical
Emergencies**



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