Exhibition

Teeth and inequality: from past to present

Teeth matter. Despite being largely preventable, oral diseases are common chronic conditions. Indeed, findings from the 2013 Global Burden of Disease Study show that untreated caries (decay) is the most prevalent and severe periodontal (gum) disease, the sixth most common disease in the world. From early childhood to old age, oral diseases have a negative impact on quality of life and social functioning. Pain, infection, and difficulties eating and speaking are all common consequences of oral disease. Dental treatment is costly to both individuals and health-care systems—across the European Union, dental treatment costs more than €79 billion per year.

Teeth, a new exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, provides a fascinating spotlight on oral diseases, a somewhat neglected area of health. The exhibition has two core themes: social inequalities in oral health; and the evolution of the profession of dentistry from backstreet barber to big business.

Over the past 50 years, there have been dramatic improvements in oral health in high-income and many middle-income countries, although the same is not true in low-income countries where sharp increases in rates of caries. For example, in the UK in 1968, 37% of adults had no natural teeth, whereas by 2009 this figure had dropped to only 6%. The changes in oral health in a generation can be illustrated at a more personal level—my 83-year-old mother had all her teeth extracted in her early twenties and full dentures fitted before her marriage, a common practice in Scotland up until the 1960s. Now, however, oral diseases are increasingly linked to socioeconomic status—a stark and visible marker of social disadvantage and deprivation. From early childhood across the lifespan to older age, oral diseases and their associated impacts are socially patterned in a consistent and universal way. The condition of the mouth is a barometer of your social status. Today's oral health inequalities are a major cause for concern for policy makers and public health practitioners worldwide. The Wellcome Collection exhibition highlights that unfair and unjust inequalities in oral health and use of dental services are not, however, a new phenomenon. A macabre etching by Thomas Rowlandson shows how in the 18th century teeth were extracted from poor children to be transplanted into the mouths of rich older people—a somewhat gruesome example of social and intergenerational inequalities, and a forerunner to modern dental implants.

The inequality theme continues by showing how in 17th and 18th-century Europe only the rich had access to dental treatment, including expensively crafted ivory dentures, whereas the less privileged had to continue to rely on barber-surgeons for extractions to relieve their pain. During the 19th and 20th centuries, emerging scientific knowledge and technologies established the dental profession as we now know it. A particular strength of Teeth is the displays that map out how the dental profession emerged and evolved from blacksmith and backstreet barber-surgeon to today's high-tech profession. Teeth showcases Pierre Fauchard's Le Chirugien-Dentiste (The Surgeon-Dentist), published in 1728. As the first scientific treatise on teeth, this work provided the foundations of dentistry as a learned and independent profession. The exhibition shows the evolution of dental equipment, the advent of anaesthetics, and other technical developments in dental care.

In many ways, Teeth highlights some of the challenges and tensions of modern dentistry. Is dentistry largely a technical and surgical profession (interventionist model) or a health profession focused on care and prevention (therapeutic model)? How can the profit-driven motives of modern dentistry be reconciled with the caring role as a health profession? How can inequalities in oral health be tackled and access to high-quality, evidence-based dental care be assured for all? Is dentistry a core element of the National Health Service or largely a private sector business only interested in cosmetic procedures? Skilful curation by James Peto and Emily Scott-Dearing provoke these important questions while also entertaining with a diverse array of exhibits ranging from Napoleon's silver handled toothbrush, an ancient Mayan tooth adorned with a jade inlay, to letters to and from the Tooth Fairy. Anyone interested in the history of the health professions and the broader social, cultural, and political agenda will find much to sink their teeth into in this informative exhibition.

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I took part in the Wellcome Collection debate Smiles Apart but had no other involvement in this exhibition.