

## **Aetna's Wellness Podcast Series - The connection between oral health and overall health**

*Interviewees Bios:*

### **Dr. Mary Lee Conicella, DMD, FAGD**

*Chief Dental Officer*

Dr. Mary Lee Conicella is Aetna's Chief Dental Officer. In her role, she creates programs that engage members and deliver superior health through integration. She was instrumental in launching Aetna's Dental-Medical Integration program and has published numerous abstracts and articles related to the impact dental care has on overall health. She is a member of Aetna's Clinical Executive Leadership Council, a team that develops clinical thought leadership positions across Aetna. She also participates on the CVS/Aetna Enterprise-Wide Opioid Task Force; implementing innovative clinical initiatives that impact the opioid crisis. She has worked for Aetna since 1997.

Dr. Conicella received her D.M.D. from Temple University School of Dentistry. She practiced general dentistry for over 15 years and achieved Fellowship status in the Academy of General Dentistry. She spent many years on the clinical faculty at the University of Pittsburgh School of Dental Medicine and currently sits on the NYU College of Dentistry Dean's Strategic Advisory Council.

### **Dr. Daniel Knecht, M.D., M.B.A.**

*Vice President, Health Strategy & Innovation*

Dr. Daniel Knecht is a board-certified internist currently serving as Vice President of Health Strategy and Innovation at CVS Health. In this role, he collaborates across CVS Health and Aetna business lines to develop and execute clinical innovations that address unmet health needs. Since joining Aetna in 2016, Dr. Knecht has led a series of enterprise-wide strategic initiatives including the company's efforts to combat opioid misuse and addiction. Following CVS Health's acquisition of Aetna, his team remains focused on leveraging data analytics to provide actionable insights for patients and providers that increase value of care.

After graduating with honors from Dartmouth College, Dr. Knecht received a joint M.D., M.B.A. from Weill Cornell Medical College and Johnson Graduate School of Management where he was a recipient of the Lee Family Scholarship. As a Fulbright Scholar in medical sciences, he performed research that explored health care deficiencies in the Negev region of Israel. Today, Dr. Knecht is an associate clinical professor at Mount Sinai West in New York City and still sees patients.

### **Samantha Lyall**

Hi everyone. And thank you for listening to our podcast series, focused on wellness. This is a series where we'll talk about current health and wellbeing topics to help you, no matter where you are in your own health journey. My name is Samantha Lyall and here with me today is Dr.

Dan Knecht, Vice President of Health Strategy and Innovation and Dr. Mary Lee Conicella, Chief Dental Officer. Thank you both for joining.

**Dr. Knecht**

Happy to be here.

**Dr. Conicella**

Happy to be here. Thank you.

**Samantha Lyall**

Today, we're going to discuss oral care and how it could have a bigger role in your overall health than you might think. To begin, can you both describe: what's the connection between good dental health and overall health

**Dr. Conicella**

Well sure, I'll get us started. So, the relationship between the two is certainly not new. In fact, back in 2000, there was the first-ever Surgeon General's Report on oral health in America. And I'm excited to say that there's actually going to be a follow-up report in 2020 from the Surgeon General. But in that report, the Surgeon General talked about the mouth being a mirror to the body, a mirror to general health and wellbeing. And so, in the simplest terms, I like to think of it as the mouth is just part of our bodies, and we should really not think separately about dental health or overall health, but just plain old health. And the strongest evidence I would say of connections are chronic oral infections and inflammation like gum disease, also known as periodontal disease or a tooth abscess, and the association of those oral conditions with chronic medical conditions like heart and lung diseases, or stroke, or diabetes or a condition, like pregnancy where it could lead to complications of low birth weight or preterm birth.

**Dr. Knecht**

Yeah, and I'll just add, It's interesting because, since the emergence of the modern healthcare system, dentistry and internal medicine have been viewed completely separately, and distinct professions. But really when you think about it, we use our mouth to eat, breathe, speak and drink, and oral health issues can cause pain, bleeding or discomfort, which clearly can negatively impact a quality of life as well as the holistic health of the patient. So, we really need to start thinking about a dental and oral health as just a part and parcel of the holistic health.

**Samantha Lyall**

How often should we be getting oral exams and what are the risks if you forego a regular cleaning?

**Dr. Conicella**

So, there's really no one size fits all recommendation. As far as how frequently, it really depends on the needs of the individual person. Some people can do perfectly fine with going once a year. Some people need to go twice or maybe even three or four times a year. And, it's

not just about getting that cleaning, sometimes it's good to at least have the oral exam.. So, for any health aspect, you want to make sure that you're getting regular care. And so, that applies to your medical health and it certainly applies to dentistry as well. As long as you're going with some sort of regularity, it will help to spot dental problems early on when they're probably going to be simpler to treat and more affordable to treat, before they become complicated. And our hope is that it will prevent some problems from developing in the first place, like periodontal or gum disease.

### **Samantha Lyall**

You talked a lot about the exam itself. I'm wondering what kind of questions should we be asking our dentists during those exams?

### **Dr. Conicella**

My best advice is really to ask any question you have on your mind, but at the very least, ask about your diagnosis. What are my treatment options? What are the benefits of each type of treatment? Will I need to have x-rays taken? And if so, what will the results tell you? Should I change my daily home care regimen? What are your thoughts on what are the best things to do as a home care regimen? And a question comes to mind, because we've been talking so much about the opioid crisis, I think a great question to ask your dentist is, what type of medicine will you be prescribing if I have a certain procedure? Does, do I need to take an opioid? Are there other pain management alternatives? Are over the counter drugs effective for my needs? Those are some of the questions that I think are important to ask.

### **Dr. Knecht**

Yeah. I think exploring conversations like smoking cessation, as well as sugar content and sugar intake are really important. It's important to limit the intake of, of sugary foods, but what we're seeing from an international perspective are citizens of many African and Asian countries are having much less, dental decay and tooth decay because in part they are not consuming nearly as much processed, sweetened foods as we are. But of course, we're starting to see that change just with the, the spread of, of more processed foods. So, clearly that's a problem from a dentist's perspective, but also, we're seeing the rise of diabetes and obesity as well. So, just another proof point of that connection between oral health and holistic health.

### **Dr. Conicella**

And we've also seen a lot of studies, in fact, Aetna has been a part of of a group working with Columbia University's College of Dental Medicine to study the effectiveness of dentists and the dental care team in doing tobacco cessation. So, visiting your dentist is actually a really good way to talk with the health provider about quitting the use of tobacco, whether it's smoking or other types of smokeless tobacco.

### **Samantha Lyall**

Aside from cutting back on sugary treats and quitting smoking, what should we be doing at home between visits?

### **Dr. Conicella**

Well, certainly the, a regular brushing and flossing, I think rinsing is important too. That's a way of cleaning the mouth that really can get everywhere. So, anything that you do with regularity, is important. And, I think your home care regimen is actually more important than some people think.

### **Samantha Lyall**

Can you get an oral exam done somewhere besides the traditional dentist's office?

### **Dr. Conicella**

Well, yes, there are actually a number of ways that somebody can access an oral evaluation besides the traditional dental office. There are dental providers who can bring equipment for an oral exam to a workplace or some other non-healthcare setting. There are dental providers who can park an entire mobile practice outside of the workplace or outside of another type of facility. And in fact, you could even get an oral exam by using an app on your mobile device.

### **Samantha Lyall**

Dr. Dan. You and your team have recently partnered with Aetna Dental to launch a program, aimed at reducing the instances of hospital-acquired pneumonia. Can you tell us what's the connection between dental care in pneumonia?

### **Dr. Knecht**

Sure. So, there's an increasing body of research that links the bacteria in your mouth with the risk of developing pneumonia, and in particular, during the post-surgical setting. What people believe is occurring here is that when a patient is recovering from an operation, they're oftentimes, lying down in bed and not breathing, sufficiently or their cough reflex is, is not as strong because are under, analgesics. So, what's going on here is something called a microaspiration event. So, that's just a fancy way of inadvertently inhaling some saliva, which is chock full of bacteria, in the lungs. And so, unfortunately, that allows bacteria to take hold into the lung and, and develop into pneumonia. I see pneumonia all the time in the hospital and it is a really serious condition. It can cause sepsis, respiratory failure and, and some, some cases can even cause death. So, this is, this is a serious condition. And, and we thought this would be an opportunity for us to intervene.

### **Dr. Conicella**

It's interesting because most people do have some sort of regular dental home care regimen. They floss or brush or rinse a certain number of times a day and they realize that that helps them keep their oral health as good as it can possibly be. But once you go into the hospital and you're a patient in a hospital, after you've had some sort of surgical procedure, you're not really thinking about your oral care regimen and I don't think anyone can fault you for that. You've got other things on your mind, as does the care team that's taking care of you in the hospital, but that's what we're trying to do is to remind our members that when they're a patient in the

hospital, it is probably even more important to take care of their oral health and to be able to do their regular home care regime while they're an inpatient.

**Dr. Knecht**

We're hoping to achieve a few things. First and foremost, we want to highlight the importance of good oral health and hygiene for our members, we also think it's a really interesting opportunity for the patient, and the provider, and the nursing staff in the hospital to have a conversation around the importance of good oral health.

**Samantha Lyall**

It definitely sounds like an exciting initiative. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Dan and Dr. Mary Lee and for sharing information on the connection between oral health and overall health and thank you to our listeners. Until next time, stay well.

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