Managing oral health for good quality of life

An interview with Dr Stuart Smith, GSK

Dr Stuart Smith has worked as a dentist and teacher in several dental hospitals and schools in the UK. Most recently, he became Vice President of Global Dental Scientific and Professional Communications for GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), a large multi-national pharmaceutical company with an extensive consumer healthcare division. DT Asia Pacific editor ClaudiaSalwiczek spoke with Dr Smith about GSK’s approach to oral care management.

Claudia Salwiczek: Dr Smith, GSK is developing solutions for the oral health management of customers throughout the world. In your opinion, what impact do oral diseases have on people’s lives?

Dr Stuart Smith: Oral diseases can have a massive and varied impact on the lives of individuals, families and communities. Dental care has been declining in many markets but remains a significant problem around the world not only causing pain for individuals but also schools of children and work days for adults. Gum diseases remain a common reason for tooth loss which in turn can have a dramatic impact on someone’s self esteem. There is also a growing interest in the links between oral health and systemic health and the role that the immune system may have in the process. Other oral diseases, such as dentine hypersensitivity and xerostomia, can also impact an individual’s quality of life with patients having to modify the way they live their lives to cope with the condition. Hence improvements in prevention and treatment of dental disease must remain a high priority.

You have been with GSK for 15 years. How does your work routine in a corporate environment compare to your university experience?

Much of the work is very similar; the objectives of dental academic researchers and industry are very closely aligned. Both are looking for ways to improve preventive and treatment outcomes for patients. Our task is to provide products that enable these improvements and the research and development is inevitably undertaken in collaboration with academic partners.

What does the development process for new products look like?

Oral healthcare fits perfectly within the GSK company mission, which is to help people to do more, feel better and live longer. Within consumer healthcare all products that are developed must be expert recommended and consumer preferred so this means we need to work extensively with external experts both within and outside the therapeutic area throughout new product development. This collaboration is ongoing right from the beginning of the project when professional insights and advice are sought right through the research phase to publication of the work in scientific journals and scientific and educational symposia. This provides evidence that dental healthcare professionals (HCPs) around the world expect and demand.

SoR&D has become globalised hasn’t it?

It certainly seems that the world is becoming a smaller place. Whilst historically R&D has been conducted in Europe and USA it is now becoming much more evenly spread throughout the world. GSK consumer healthcare has now established R&D facilities and capabilities in India and China and are constantly seeking ways of building collaborative relationships in Asia to ensure we capitalise on the scientific expertise and capabilities in this region.

What are the benefits of these relationships?

Through such collaborations we access an extensive knowledge base and gain insights into the specific health needs of the individual countries. We also recognise that most important new therapeutic breakthroughs will be discovered by researchers in universities spread throughout the world. We embrace this through a system of open innovation where we partner with the inventors and collaboratively develop products and bring them to market. (Editorial note: For more information, please visit www.innovation.gsk.com).

It seems that you are also working closely with HCPs… Absolutely. GSK and HCPs strive towards the same goals, understand and serving the needs of the patients. In order to do so successfully, good communication and a working relationship with HCPs are essential.

Where does the consumer factor in this process?

Consumers increasingly not only want to be healthy but to be happy with their smile and be confident in social settings without having to undertake avoiding habits such as consumers with dentine hypersensitivity avoiding ice cream or denture wearers having to avoid hard foods. We spend much time and money talking with consumers both in groups and individually to really understand how they feel and what they want. The consumer insights that this generates enable us to develop products or educational materials that directly target the needs of our customers.

Can you give us an example?

A simple example is that whilst approximately one in three people report suffering from dentine hypersensitivity only half of these patients will actually mention it to their dentist and so the treatment is untreated.

With your Sensodyne toothpaste brand you say you have developed a solution for this problem.

Indeed. Sensodyne is the most widely used toothpaste in the world for the treatment of sensitive teeth. This success has been achieved with the involvement of partnerships between GSK and the dental profession and it is something we are extremely proud of.

We have been able to provide scientific support and educational materials on dentine hypersensitivity to both healthcare professionals and to our own staff, have been able to increase patient attendance at the dentist and encourage dialogue about the condition between patient and dentist. Through a thorough understanding of the aetiology of tooth sensitivity people are now able to use a scientifically proven product to improve their health.

The GSK company mission is to help people to do more, feel better and live longer.

You suggested earlier that people need to be educated in order to achieve a change in oral care behaviour. What are some of the measures GSK takes to facilitate this change?

Positive health behaviour change in prevention disease is generally very difficult to implement. Dental disease is no different in this regard. However, other conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and reducing tobacco usage. GSK works with dental health-care professionals to improve education amongst the profession and also in communication with consumers. We undertake programmes to raise awareness of dental health, dental disease and measures that can be taken to control it. This can also serve to increase regular visits to the dentist and open dialogue between patients and dentists, which all help to facilitate positive health behaviour change. Attitudes to dental health and personal responsibility for our own health are also changing but take time as children’s attitudes will be heavily influenced by their parents experiences and beliefs. It is highly advantageous if

positive health behaviours can be established at a young age.

You suggested earlier, that patient compliance to oral care instructions is still an issue… Unfortunately yes. Dental professionals around the world are working hard to modify patient behaviour on a daily basis. We are aware that it is critical that the flavour and mouthfeel of our products are acceptable to drive compliance. It is no good having a really effective product if the patient won’t use it.

For some products such as Aquafresh, the flavour and mouthfeel are a real bonus driving usage since most people want the therapeutic benefits delivered by fluoride but also like the sensorial experience of brushing and the resulting feeling of a freshly cleaned mouth and the confidence that fresh breath brings. It can be a similar situation with denture wearers who may be embarrassed that they wear dentures but find that keeping a denture clean with Polident is a fast and effective way of removing bacterial deposits. The resulting reassurance that denture odour is controlled leads to greater confidence in social settings and improved quality of life. This beneficial outcome provides positive feedback and encouragement to maintain good practice.

For other products it is a tougher challenge to deliver the efficacy with quite the same level of patient acceptance because the active ingredients that are required for the product to work can have a negative impact on flavour. The task is then to deliver the optimal sensory characteristics without impacting the efficacy. When a new product hits the shelf extensive testing will have been undertaken with hundreds of consumers who have used the products at home in real life conditions for prolonged periods to ensure patient acceptability.

In summary, dental healthcare professionals and consumers are at the heart of everything we do. It is our goal to develop products that experts want to recommend and patients want to use.

Thank you for this interview!

Dr Stuart Smith can be contacted at stuart.t.smith@gsk.com.

Contact Info

Chela A. Salwiczek
DT Asia Pacific Edition

Photo: Courtesy Monkey Business Images