

Oral Care at the End of Life

Morag Muir, Leigh Deas and Maura Edwards

“I was able to kiss my wife because her mouth was clean”

Feedback to oral health team in NHS Lanarkshire

Introduction

Good oral health is a basic human right and maintaining a clean and comfortable mouth is essential during the end stages of life. Symptoms relating to the mouth are common at this time and frequent examination, assessment and re-examination of the mouth enables problems to be identified and managed promptly.

Caring for Smiles (Cfs) is Scotland's oral health improvement programme for dependent older people. Through effective partnerships with NHS Education for Scotland (NES), the Care Inspectorate (CI) and the care home sector, the programme aims to provide training and support to staff working in care homes to deliver optimal daily mouth care.

As care homes take on more responsibility for end of life care, the role of Caring for Smiles in supporting and promoting good oral health and regular mouth care is becoming increasingly important.



Photograph from Caring for Smiles Guide for Care Homes

Mouth Care in End of Life Care

A healthy mouth can help people continue to speak, eat, drink and take medications for as long as possible. Avoiding pain, dry mouth and oral infections improves quality of life both physically and emotionally for the individual. Families also appreciate seeing their loved ones kept comfortable at the end stages of life, as evidenced in the quote above.

The Scottish Palliative Care Guidelines (updated 2019) include a comprehensive section on delivering mouth care and managing complications which may affect oral health at the end of life. These detailed guidelines are evidence based and include advice on identification of serious problems which require referral to a palliative care specialist or a dentist.

Training to Deliver Mouth Care at the End of Life

Scottish Government Strategic Framework for Action on Palliative and End of Life Care (2015) recognises that staff working in this field require to feel adequately trained and supported to provide the care needed to people in the end stages of life. As a vital component of end of life care, training and support in delivering mouth care is essential. Caring for Smiles which is already well established in care homes across Scotland is ideally placed to offer this.

Caring for Smiles

Oral health improvement teams in Health Boards in Scotland provide support, advice and resources through Caring for Smiles to staff to deliver improved mouth care to dependent older people living in care homes, as well as in other settings in the community and hospitals.



Caring for Smiles teams provide hands on oral health training. Training includes instruction in carrying out an oral health risk assessment, formulating an oral care plan and documenting daily mouth care, as well as practical aspects of caring for teeth, dentures and soft tissues in the mouth.

In 2013, a Caring for Smiles Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework (SCQF) accredited training course was developed by NES. The accredited training has two levels, Foundation and Intermediate. Foundation training provides an introduction with instruction on key aspects of providing mouth care. The Intermediate level provides the opportunity for more detailed learning on more specialised areas, including palliative and end of life care. Each level is based on 20 notional hours of learning. Staff are assessed through multiple choice questions (Foundation) and short answers (Intermediate), reflective diaries and direct observation of procedures. Evaluation of Credit Rated Training has found that the opportunity to gain a formally recognised qualification is highly valued by care workers.

Building on from the original Guide for Care Homes, a number of additional Caring for Smiles resources have been developed in partnership with NHS Health Scotland, the Care Inspectorate and charities such as Let's Talk About Mouth Cancer. These are for various target groups such as oral health professionals, care home staff and families and friends.



Support is Available

Training and support in mouth care is available to anyone whose role involves caring for people in the end stages of life. For details of your local Caring for Smiles coordinator please contact the Caring for Smiles programme manager at leigh.deas@aapct.scot.nhs.uk.

Support to provide mouth care to people under the age of 65 who require end of life care is also available through the Open Wide programme for adults with additional care needs.

Mouth care at the end of life:

- Assess daily for changes
- Clean teeth using a soft, small-headed toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste after each meal and at bedtime. Keep any dentures scrupulously clean
- Damp gauze (non fraying type, thoroughly wetted in clean running water) wrapped round a gloved finger may be used if the individual is unconscious or unable to tolerate a toothbrush
- Apply water based saliva replacement gels (eg. Biotene oral balance) or aqueous cream to lips