



*J. Peter St. Clair, DMD*

## Brighter Smiles

### IS IT WORTH IT?

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I have written before on the importance of dental x-rays and the relationship it has to being able to properly diagnose. Although the incidences are less, there is still too often, resistance to this mandatory diagnostic tool. Why? The most common reason I hear is, "I have had too many x-rays".

Without spending too much time on the specifics of radiation accumulation and the literature that denounces any ill-effects from routine dental radiation, I will go as far to say that you get more radiation from environmental sources than dental x-rays. Having said that, let me give you a couple of specific examples of what can happen if you don't have routine dental x-rays and you decide which poses more risk.

A remarkably youthful 86-year-old woman goes for her first dental appointment in an office. For years she went to another local dentist. He routinely did not take a full mouth series of dental x-rays every five years, which is the standard of care. This

seems to be far too often the common trend, especially among the older dentists. About 13 months ago she developed pain above her maxillary lateral tooth. The dentist thought it was a periodontal (gum) issue and advised her to consult a periodontist.

The periodontist treated the area for infection, and when the symptoms did not resolve after one week, he referred her to an oral surgeon who biopsied the area. It turned out to be squamous cell carcinoma. The patient had three-quarters of her maxilla removed at a Boston hospital and an excellent maxillary prosthesis fabricated.

She now says she has trouble eating and is constantly dealing with mucus and watery eyes. She has dealt with depression due to the extensive surgery and the devastation it has caused. She said it would have happened no matter what, but it should have been caught sooner.

She never drank, smoked, or had any high-risk behavior. Who is liable? That is not difficult to figure out. More importantly, is this any way to live your later years of life, especially if it could have been easily avoided?

What about the patient who had been going to the same dentist for 30 years and always refused x-rays "unless they were absolutely necessary"? The dentist even had the patient sign a piece of paper saying that he refused the x-rays. The patient was finally convinced by a "new" dentist to have routine x-rays. Note: the patient had no dental complaints at the time.

The result – three large bony infections that required four extractions, extensive

surgery and over \$20,000 of restorative dentistry which took over a year and a half to get him back to function properly.

Although these are not the most severe cases I can report, they are very significant. There are even more routine situations when dental x-rays could have saved teeth, prevented the anguish of more extensive dental procedures and saved patients tons of money.

Please, think about this. Dental x-rays are safe, have continually improved to produce less radiation (especially with digital radiography), and are absolutely mandatory for proper diagnosis. It is not worth the risk for the patient or the dentist. And, if you are one of the 50% of the population that does not routinely go to the dentist, think about what could be growing without you knowing.

Dr. St. Clair maintains a private dental practice in Rowley and Newburyport dedicated to health-centered family dentistry. If there are certain topics you would like to see written about or questions you have please email them to him at [jpstclair@dentalhealthforlife.com](mailto:jpstclair@dentalhealthforlife.com). You can view all previously written columns at [www.dentalhealthforlife.com](http://www.dentalhealthforlife.com).

