‘HIV tests should be offered in every dental practice’

By Daniel Zimmermann, DTI Group Editor

According to the latest figures from the United Nations organization UNAIDS, more than 34 million people worldwide are currently living with the HIV virus. Because it can take up to 10 years before progressing to AIDS, early testing can be a life-saving factor.

New tests for HIV checks in dental practices have recently been developed. Dental Tribune Asia Pacific met with Dr. Catrise Austin, who maintains a dental practice — VIP Smiles — on 57th Street in New York City, to speak about HIV testing in her practice and how such testing could help to create a heightened awareness of the disease amongst patients.

Dr. Austin, would you tell our readers the reason you decided to offer free HIV tests to your patients?

The idea for offering free HIV tests to my patients arose earlier this year once I had learnt that doctors other than medical doctors can offer HIV testing in their practices. I said to myself: “Why not add another service to our existing checklist of lesions or cavities and give patients the opportunity to know their status in a different setting?” I saw this as a unique opportunity for me as a dentist to diagnose HIV in its early stages.

Unfortunately, the virus is still highly prevalent. In New York City alone, there are 94,000 confirmed cases and it seems that the number of infections is not improving in 2009/2010.

Why should dental offices test for infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis in the first place?

My opinion is that HIV tests should be offered in every dental practice because the oral cavity is one of the
first places that shows signs of HIV infection. You can detect signs of herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases in the mouth as well, and so we look for lesions and other signs or symptoms of the disease. I am currently not aware of other tests that may diagnose diseases other than HIV/AIDS; it would be fantastic if we were able to diagnose everything through the mouth.

**How does the test work?**

The test is called OraSure Advance and it tests for antibodies in the blood system. It uses an oral swab, which we take under the upper and lower lips and place in a developing solution directly at the beginning of our dental appointments.

The results are available within 20 minutes and we can start with normal treatment immediately after we have done the test.

Unfortunately, I often encounter skepticism from some of my colleagues about the comfort level and the way to introduce the test to a patient in a dental setting. I tell them every time that the test is very easy to apply without making the patient feel uncomfortable. I guess that like most new ideas it takes some getting used to, but it will be successful because we are helping to save people's lives.

So we hope to get more dentists all over the world interested in offering the test because it is easy for the patients and takes only a little bit of time.

**Is the test optional?**

The test is completely optional and we offer it to all our patients, from teenagers who are in high school and probably sexually active to those in their 60s and older. We do not discriminate because the virus does not discriminate.

Since we began administering the test in August, we have offered it to about 150 patients of which about 60 percent have taken it. Fortunately, we did not have any positive testing so far.

**What happens if a patient tests positive?**

We are fully trained and prepared in case a test is positive. If a patient tests positive, we counsel him or her immediately and help him or her call a primary health physician to schedule a confirmatory test.

It is important to note that the test that we offer is a screening test only and not a confirmed test. If a patient does not have a physician, we usually refer him or her to one of the clinics in the New York City area with which we have a partnership.

**There are thousands of people in the US and more around the world who are unaware that they are HIV/AIDS infected. Do you think that regular checks in dental practices could help to create more awareness of the disease?**

That is something I would like to see happening as more dentists begin administering the test. It is time to recognize that we should be concerned with the patient's holistic health, not only his or her oral health.

I am the first dentist in New York to offer the test, and I would love to be the trailblazer and help to make the test the standard of care in dental practices around the world.

The greatest joy for me is when a patient says that he or she would have never undergone this test if it were not for me.

Stewart president of CDA

By Fred Michmershuizen, Online Editor

The California Dental Association recently elected a new president and new officers. Dr. Thomas Stewart, a U.S. Navy captain and dentistry veteran of more than 50 years, was elected president of the CDA. He was installed recently at the CDA’s House of Delegates meeting in Sacramento and will serve a one-year term.

Also taking office at the CDA’s House of Delegates meeting were: Carol Gomez Summerhays, DDS, immediate past president; Andrew Soderstrom, DDS, president-elect; Daniel Davidson, DMD, vice president; Clelan Ehrler, DDS, treasurer; Alan Felsenfeld, DDS, speaker of the house; and Kenny Carney, DDS, editor.

As president, Stewart will continue CDA’s mission of improving the oral health of all Californians.

“As I begin my year as president, I recognize the many challenges that face our profession and our service to the public, especially in these economic times,” Stewart said.

“This year’s state budget crisis resulted in the loss of two government programs that provided dental education and services to low-income children and adults. This has had a tragic impact on the number of people who experience barriers to receiving dental care. Dentists must be the leaders, providing the expertise to develop solutions to this problem. “

“CDA is truly fortunate to have a president of the caliber of Tom Stewart,” said Dr. Thornton A. D’Arc, a longtime CDA volunteer leader.

“Tom is visionary, but his vision is tempered by his common sense.”

Stewart has been a leader in the field of dentistry since he graduated from Howard University College of Dentistry in 1972. He served four years in the U.S. Navy on active duty as a dentist and then 19 years in the naval reserve, retiring as a captain in 1997. He has operated his own practice in Bakersfield since 1976.

Stewart has also held leadership positions at the local and national level. He has been a member of the American Dental Association since 1976 and served on the ADA Council of Communications from 1994 to 1995. He is a member of the Kern County Dental Society and served as president, six years as a trustee and was a long-time member of the board of directors.

In addition to his DDS degree, Stewart also received honorary degrees from the Pierre Fauchard Academy, the International College of Dentists and the American College of Dentists.

He has also been a Kiwanis Club member for 53 years (with a perfect attendance record), on the Teen Challenge of Kern County Advisory Board for 25 years; and has been on the board for 20 years of STEPS (Special Treatment Education and Prevention Services), a local drug and alcohol treatment and rehabilitation organization, serving two years as president.