Open up and say ‘ahhh’

Oral health therapist Tang Wei Qi tells Joan Chew people do not have to be toothless in old age if they take care of their teeth

I perform basic dental procedures, such as scaling and polishing, because... They are what the general population needs to prevent complicated dental problems. I also like to see a healthy and clean mouth. As a child, I was intrigued by a book, Papa, I Want To Have Braces, by Dr Goh Gek Kiow. I found the pictures captivating and the content easy to understand. It made me want to know more about how teeth can be shifted by braces.

Dentistry is fascinating because... It is more than just treating a disease. It contains elements of art and science and involves reconstruction for a good functional outcome and an aesthetically pleasing smile.

One little known fact about dental problems is... One does not need to be "bo geh" (Hokkien for toothless) when one is old, especially since most tooth loss is due to decay and gum disease – both of which are preventable. Like other chronic illnesses, gum disease is a silent killer in its early stages. As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure.

If I were to give an analogy for what I do, I would be... A chameleon. I need to be a good listener and pick up cues of what is said or not said by the patient to guide me in my work. For instance, some patients are uncomfortable revealing certain medical conditions as they are afraid of being stigmatised. Or they may look upset and you need to ask the right questions to understand why they are feeling so, which may correlate to their dental well-being.

A typical day for me would... Start with me waking up at 6am. The first dental appointment is at 8am and I finish at 5.30pm. I spend half an hour to an hour with each patient. On some days, I supervise oral health therapist trainees during their school attachments at the Health Promotion Board. My lunch hour may be occupied with meetings for work or with professional clubs to review and critique journal articles so we can apply evidence-based dentistry in our daily practice. After work, my activities include chilling out with friends, going for Zumba classes or attending lessons at UniSim, where I am pursuing a bachelor’s degree in sociology with communications.

I have come across all types of cases... With the youngest being four years old and the oldest in his 90s. I see more older patients than young ones, who are seen at the paediatric unit. Handling special needs patients is the most challenging yet memorable task. I had a patient who needed to be physically restrained by two people while I performed scaling, as he could not be treated safely if he moved. I had to constantly watch out for his fists.

When treating such patients, it never fails to dawn on me how much stress their caregivers face daily, the love and patience needed and how truly admirable caregivers are.

I love patients who are... Understanding and appreciative of oral health therapists. Gum treatment often involves the patient enduring varying degrees of discomfort, so I am really grateful to those who understand that I am trying my best to make them comfortable while removing as much of the tartar as possible.

People who get my goat are... The demanding ones. Some of them come into the clinic with a mentality that dental treatment is painful. This heightened sense of pain awareness predisposes them to pain itself, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. I have to educate them that the pain is a result of the state of their teeth and gums. Hence, it is important for them to practise good oral hygiene so that they need not undergo such pain again.

Things that make me smile are... When a patient tells me he does not feel gum pain any more or when a patient, who used to feel pain even while swallowing porridge, can munch on peanuts after treatment. Most of the time, patients do feel better after periodontal (gum) treatment – an achievement for me.

It breaks my heart when... I listen to patients’ sad stories. I have a patient who is almost totally blind because of a severe medical condition, which had been under control for many years until a recent relapse. I was very touched by his optimistic outlook on life.

I would not trade places for the world because... This is one of the most dynamic jobs. At National Dental Centre Singapore, we handle more complex medical conditions, which make our work even more challenging.

My best tip is... Have a dental check-up once or twice a year. Many studies have found a link between one’s general health and oral health. For example, a person with uncontrolled diabetes will have greater difficulty controlling periodontal disease and vice versa.