

Can a Tooth Ache be Deadly?



Who today would believe that left untreated, a serious tooth abscess could eventually kill!

This certainly represented my perceptions upon my graduating from Dental School at McGill University in 1978. I recall half way through completion of a General Practice Residency Program at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital how self assured I felt at being able to manage in collaboration with my medical colleagues, most if not all dental emergencies. Simply put what transpired thereafter was most humbling and a stark wakeup call that we within the medical-dental profession are far from omnipotent. Infections especially in the head and neck area represent a critically serious health concern.

Despite the 35 years that have since past, I vividly recall that one faithful Sunday evening when I received notification (we all wore pagers in those days) of a dental emergency. A young mother of limited means presented at Mount Sinai Hospital only days following the extraction of her four impacted wisdom teeth. Despite the professional recommendations of the treating dentist, she failed to take the prescribed antibiotics and lacked adequate nutrition and hydration. When this young mother presented at Mount Sinai Hospital, she was febrile (103.5°F), lethargic and demonstrating a severe facial cellulitis (infection). Fortunately, through intravenous antibiotics and nutritional supplementation, within 24 hours this same individual was well on her way on the road to recovery, returned to a normal body temperature (non-febrile), was alert and desirous to be discharged. Sadly, once back in her home environment and with the sole responsibility to care of her new born infant, she once again returned to her old ways. She failed to remain hydrated, abstained from eating and once again discontinued taking the antibiotics prescribed. Within three in a half days, this same individual represented at Mount Sinai Hospital unconscious, with a raging fever and even more ominous, exhibited of a *stiff neck* indicative that infection had spread to her spinal column-brain. Over the following two weeks, every available medical resource was employed in an effort to save this young mother's life. Despite heroic efforts, sadly she succumbed to infection. At autopsy, a direct continuity between the location of her upper wisdom tooth and the brain was noted. A young mother's life was snuffed out, arguably way too soon! This event remains imbedded in my psyche whenever I am called upon to evaluate patients with potential infection.

To prescribe antibiotics when there exists no clear indications of infection is equally as risky as withholding antibiotics that could potentially represent life-saving treatment in the appropriate instance. There is no substitute for timely treatment. I am always available for our patients when issues of concern arise.