

# In the dentist's chair

– a new perspective on oral care



**Dr John Haughey's role as Vhi's Chief Dental Officer is informed and shaped by his day-to-day experience as a dentist. In this interview, he shares some insights on his working week – half of which he spends in a busy Dublin practice where he has a high proportion of patients from the corporate sector and half in his role at Ireland's largest dental insurer.**

Given the city centre location of his practice many of Dr Haughey's patients are busy corporate employees for whom time is a scarce resource: "We aim to be as accessible as possible. On Mondays I work late until 8pm, which allows patients to attend after they have finished work."

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## The importance of regular dental visits

Dr Haughey is well-attuned to the oral health challenges corporate employees face. While patient issues are many and varied, there are some pronounced trends: "People can often let the routine of regular dental visits slip particularly if they're not experiencing overtly painful symptoms. This is a mistake as problems can develop even when the individual is not actually experiencing pain and, most importantly, regular dental visits make it more likely that oral health issues can be addressed before they become serious problems."



## Identifying problems early

There is increased awareness of, and a growing body of research into, the challenges surrounding mental health in the workplace, with the impact of stress a particular focus of attention. In this context, Dr Haughey notes that stress in the corporate workplace can have a direct impact on oral health. For example, it can account for a greater susceptibility to teeth grinding: “Grinding affects jaw position, and can cause headaches, migraines, facial pain, neck pain, and joint pain as well as issues with the teeth themselves grinding off each other and affecting teeth structure. The longer this type of condition is ignored the more likely it is to become chronic.”

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Among other oral health issues that corporate employees can present with, Dr Haughey says that one of the most potentially serious is obstructive sleep apnoea. “This occurs where the airway is obstructed and the patient can’t breathe through it. Often this is due to the tongue falling back on the airway during sleep.”

“The condition can lead to disturbed sleeping patterns and tiredness during the day. Given the amount of factors impacting mental health that often seem beyond our control, it makes sense that relatively manageable conditions like this should be addressed as early as possible.”

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## A relaxed environment

Dr Haughey often finds that patients from the corporate sector tend not to have visited the dentist in quite some time. “Often, they will have spent several years focusing on their career and, when they come to me, they are in their mid to late-20s or early 30s, and need seven, eight or nine fillings.”

For those who have not been to the dentist in a while, the good news is that the visit is a comfortable and pleasant experience. “Dental practices work hard to ensure that the patient journey is as relaxed and calming as possible. The equipment and materials that dentists use reflect this patient-centred philosophy. For instance, the ‘injection’, much dreaded in the past, is now streamlined with the use of a finer needle and the application of soothing gels to numb the relevant area of the mouth in advance.”

Dr Haughey has a busy daily work schedule. Numbers can vary from the high twenties to the early forties, depending on the complexity of the treatments that the individual patients require, but he usually sees an average of thirty-plus patients a day. Routine cases will typically include examinations, teeth cleaning, fillings and crowns.

## High-tech, low stress

From the patient’s point of view, technology is not only making the visit to the dentist much less daunting, it is also reducing the duration of treatments, an important factor for Dr Haughey’s busy, time-poor patients: “There have been tremendous advances in ensuring the ease of treatment from the patient’s point of view. In the past, the process of crowning a tooth required a temporary crown to be worn for four or five weeks. Today, the dentist can scan the affected tooth, process the crown as required while the patient waits and cement it, all in one visit.”

Technology is transforming dentistry in many ways, Dr Haughey says: “Oral scanners are now used widely. For instance, one innovative solution currently available is a pen-shaped scanner that produces a computer-generated 3D model of teeth, without the need for dental moulds. In another example of exciting innovation, the use of fluorescent light as a diagnostic tool in the early detection of oral cancer has proven successful and it is rapidly becoming more widely available. Vhi offers this service as part of the oral health awareness programmes it delivers to corporate partners.”

New hi-tech dental solutions are being introduced all the time: “In US practices, 3D printers are now commonplace. They have many applications such as printing a model of the patient’s teeth, or printing transparent aligners or mouth guards. It’s only a matter of time before they are equally widespread across Irish practices.”

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## Enhancing the patient experience

While his clinical work brings Dr Haughey into direct contact with corporate employees and their oral health concerns, his role as Chief Dental Officer with Vhi, provides him with an opportunity to influence the advancement of oral health in the corporate sector on a much wider scale. “My work with Vhi varies from day to day. I can be based at Vhi HQ where I provide support for the team, reviewing treatments that have been claimed and assessing clinical notes, radiographs and photographs that have come in from dentists to support their treatment plans. I also focus on Vhi’s overall dental care policy, exploring how we can add benefits to the policy and looking at how we can enhance the patient experience for thousands of corporate employees.”

## Building awareness

“The work also takes me around the country visiting corporate partners as part of Vhi’s awareness programme initiative. This involves visiting corporates and setting up oral health education days. During these day-long events, we provide advice on good oral care routines and separate the facts from the myths. A lot of people believe as long as they are brushing their teeth regularly that constitutes good oral health care. But technique is as important as frequency. Equally, there is a general lack of awareness of the impact of diet and dietary habits on teeth. For instance, in the context of oral health specifically, the frequency of sugar intake is more significant than the amount.”

With each generation, Dr Haughey says it is evident that people are becoming better informed about their oral health: “For my parents’ generation, brushing teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste was unusual, whereas it became the norm for us. Today, millennials understand the importance of interdental cleaning with mouthwash and floss. Each generation is growing in awareness and improving the quality of oral health.”



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