When Dr. Thomas Sollecito entered Penn’s School of Dental Medicine as a student, he thought the path ahead was clear: earn a dental degree, then open a family practice, much like the one where he received dental care while growing up. However, his experiences at Penn Dental Medicine opened Dr. Sollecito’s eyes to the profound, even life-altering, impact he could make in his patients’ lives by pursuing a career that merged clinical care, research, and education in the specialty of oral medicine.

ON THE FRONTLINES OF FIGHTING DISEASE

Dr. Sollecito, Chair of the Department of Oral Medicine at Penn Dental Medicine and Division Chief of Oral Medicine in the University of Pennsylvania Health System, crafted a widely-respected career around the tenet that dentists are uniquely positioned to serve as the first line of defense against diseases far beyond tooth decay.

“The discipline of oral medicine is concerned with the health of the teeth and gum tissues but because the presentation of diseases in the mouth can be harbingers of underlying issues, our responsibility is really to the patient’s health as a whole,” Dr. Sollecito says. “Diseases from Crohn’s to cancer can be detected in the mouth at their earliest stages, which is why approaching dental care from a broader perspective is essential.”

For example, an oral medicine professional can potentially identify signs of anemia through a common canker sore or recognize persistent dry mouth as a trigger to test for an autoimmune disease. By focusing his work in the clinic, lab and classroom on recognizing ways that oral health is intertwined with other areas of medicine, Dr. Sollecito helps patients arrive at critical diagnoses much sooner than would be otherwise possible.

TRANSLATING RESEARCH TO DENTAL CARE

A component of Dr. Sollecito’s research is improving outcomes for people who are undergoing serious medical or surgical procedures with oral health implications by connecting dental care to overall patient health. One current study focuses on head and neck radiation therapy, which is known to increase vulnerability to oral health problems.

“We are trying to identify the best course of action for patients before they undergo radiation therapy so that we can mitigate lifelong negative effects, such as ulcerations and tooth loss,” Dr.
Sollecito says, “By integrating the concepts of oral medicine into a patient’s treatment at an early stage, we are circumventing complications that could cause a patient unnecessary hardship.”

Dr. Sollecito’s drive to improve the patient experience by developing research-backed best practices has led to higher standards of dental care across the board. As a member of an expert panel charged with updating the American Dental Association’s guidelines on oral cancer diagnostics, he and his colleagues found that evidence supporting some commonly used tests for detecting oral cancers was low in quality. Their review concluded that conducting a biopsy for suspicious lesions remains the best course of action for dentists, saving patients the costs in stress, time and money of undergoing multiple adjunct tests that often yield unreliable results.

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION

As a professor of oral medicine, Dr. Sollecito energizes students around the field’s potential to profoundly improve patients’ quality of life.

“The first lecture I give my Penn Dental Medicine students reminds them that, yes, they are here to learn how to take care of oral health, but that it is important to recognize that they may be the person who actually saves a life,” Dr. Sollecito says. “It is very important to me that this message is incorporated into the education of our students early on.”

By teaching his students the immense value of integrating clinical care across both medical and dental specialties and base that care in evidence acquired through academic research, Dr. Sollecito is advancing Penn Dental Medicine’s legacy of graduating oral health care providers poised to make the next groundbreaking discovery in the field.

“I truly believe that teaching is the most important thing that I do,” Dr. Sollecito says. “It was the professors and mentors that I had here at Penn Dental Medicine that guided my career to where I am today, and I hope to enlighten my students in that same way.”

AN UNEXPECTED PATH TO DIAGNOSIS

Patients under Dr. Sollecito’s care benefit from his ability to connect seemingly unrelated symptoms in the mouth to a critical diagnosis. A middle-aged patient arrived in Dr. Sollecito’s office with ulcers, a symptom that is generally not a cause for concern, but unusual for a man of his age. The blood tests Dr. Sollecito ordered revealed anemia; follow up gastrointestinal testing led to the discovery of a cancerous polyp. Since the cancer was caught at an early stage and removed, the patient was spared more aggressive forms of treatment and the risk of spreading. “The patient came back into my office recently and told me, ‘You saved my life. You did something good.’ It was the best feeling in the world.”

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on how to support the research of Dr. Sollecito, contact Elizabeth Ketterlinus, Senior Associate Dean for Development & Alumni Relations, ekett@upenn.edu, 215-898-3328.