Oral health begins at primary school
Patrick Hescot & Hervé Caron

Boubou, a comical little hippopotamus, goes to school where he meets all his old chums, the other animals from the jungle. After fooling about on the way to school, they are now behaving themselves and paying attention to the lesson that their schoolteacher, a giraffe, is giving. She tells them to brush their teeth well, and of course it is much easier and more fun when you do it to music. So everybody repeats the verses and the chorus of the song, while pictures are projected on the classroom wall. That makes it easier to remember that we must brush the upper and lower teeth separately, that we concentrate on one side at a time, and that “we’ll brush all our teeth, right down to the big ones at the back.”

It was a dental surgeon who came to our school to teach us this song – “Do you know how to brush your teeth like Boubou does?” – and a lot of other things about taking care of them. Because when you are between your fourth and eighth birthdays, if you want to have fine strong teeth all your life, you already have to learn to take them seriously. And since you’ve already seen plenty of advertisements for toothpaste on the television, you already know quite a lot and are quite happy to put questions to the visiting dental surgeon.

You can even practise the movements he taught you with a big model of a jaw and a giant toothbrush, because he left behind with the schoolteacher a poster, some leaflets and – for everyone – a little bag with a cup, a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

Another place, another time
This morning, a big lorry arrived and could only just find room to park in the schoolyard. A very special lorry because it is laid out like a real dentist’s consulting room, with a waiting room, a dental chair, lighting, compressed air, instruments for inspecting teeth and – of course – everything needed for sterilizing the instruments. This lorry has criss-crossed France for a month, calling at a dozen towns in the course of an operation called Dental Health Month. Carried out under the auspices of the French Union for Oral and Dental Health and a well-known brand of toothpaste, the campaign is in its second phase. This consists of case-finding, and using audiovisual aids to put across the messages of prevention and oral hygiene, as well as distributing to every schoolchild a kit containing a toothbrush and toothpaste, brooch-pins and a strip cartoon.

A dental surgeon and an educator have shared the work to make sure that teeth inspections, case-finding and health education are all carried out under the best possible conditions.

The French Union was created more than 25 years ago by the dental profession, and concentrates on promoting, motivating and
coordinating the various efforts in favour of oral health, but particularly on researching and introducing various new means for detecting and preventing oral and dental infections. The Union groups together 15,000 dental practitioners and acts in partnership with the social security services, friendly societies, the community health and sanitation services, the education authorities, and pharmaceutical laboratories. Its mission was formally recognized in a ministerial circular letter, which opened all the nation’s school doors to its officials. So the Union now has access to all of France’s primary and secondary schools through its committees scattered throughout every département (county) in the country.

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This colourful kit makes it fun to brush your teeth.

Schoolchildren in Mali learn good brushing techniques from a large-scale model. (See article next page).

Common oral disease problems

In our mouths there are billions of living bacteria. Most of them are harmless, some even helping the digestion of our food. Dental plaque is the soft white or yellow layer that sticks to the teeth. Plaque is mainly bacteria but it also contains remains of saliva, cells of the mouth tissues, and fibres from food. Some of the bacteria that grow in the mouth cause tooth decay and gum disease. They produce different substances that change the enamel or the tissues that hold the teeth.

Plaque builds up where the gum meets the neck of the tooth, in the grooves of the chewing surfaces of the teeth, and in the narrow spaces between the teeth. Plaque is found in everybody’s mouth, but some have much more than others. These people are more likely to develop gum disease and tooth decay.

Dental caries: The bacteria in the plaque produce acids from food we eat; these acids attack the tooth enamel and cause caries. The bacteria grow and produce a lot of acid very quickly if they are supplied with sugar.

If extractions are to be avoided, caries must be prevented from starting or, when present, must be treated with a filling. Most dental caries occurs in children and young adults. Older people mainly have caries of the root and problems with replacement or repairs of fillings.

Inflamed or bleeding gums: Gingivitis or inflammation of the gums usually begins in the gums between the teeth. Most people develop gingivitis at some time in their life. Bacteria in the plaque are the cause of the disease. If plaque is removed every day thoroughly, the gums will become healthy after one week. Bleeding from the gums is a common sign of gingivitis. Periodontitis is a serious bacterial infection of the tissues and bone around the teeth. The bacteria attack the fibres that hold the teeth in the jaw. When this happens a gap forms between the teeth and the gum. This gap is called a periodontal pocket. The pocket fills with debris and bacteria which cause further damage. The fibres that hold the teeth are gradually destroyed, and the teeth become loose. Periodontitis is a problem of older adults, but is much less common than gingivitis.

Calculus: If plaque is not removed for a long time it hardens into calculus. Calculus makes cleaning the teeth and gums very difficult – so it should be removed by a trained oral health worker.