

Resources for Top Dentists & People in Pain

Solutions from the Michigan Head & Neck Institute

Dr. Richard Klein, director of the Michigan Head & Neck Institute, emphasizes an important fact to his colleagues in the field of dentistry: “I no longer provide mainstream dentistry,” says the multi-credentialed dentist, “and therefore, I am not a threat to a general dentist’s livelihood.” In fact, Dr. Klein hasn’t practiced general or cosmetic dentistry in the past 20 years — not since a serious auto accident left him in unbearable pain.

That unfortunate accident both ruined his general practice and then guided him toward a rewarding new path in pain research. “Ultimately, I just wanted to feel better. But before long, others noticed my recovery and began asking for advice,” he says. It would take much more research and training — often at locations around the world — to become the well-respected pain authority that he is today. Now, he admits, “it is humbling how much more prepared I’ve become to guide a patient through the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of pain, having known pain intimately myself. I understand that someone’s pain is not all in their head. It’s very real.”

Pain related to disrupted sleep and sleep apnea has become a critical issue in our overstressed society. Sleep apnea, resulting in the lack of rested sleep, sets the stage for increased tension and body aches in those who suffer with the problem. It also causes elevated emotional responses, similar to PMS. But most importantly, sleep apnea contributes to heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and even possibly death. “Sleep apnea has often been overlooked in the medical and dental communities,” Dr. Klein says, “but for legal reasons, I think it will soon be given its due on a widespread level.”

Dr. Klein believes sleep apnea is positioned to become the “legal hotbed” of the decade, much like the litigation crisis of the 1980s that saw dentists defending legal suits in record numbers because they hadn’t pre-diagnosed periodontal disease.

What confuses the modern-day sleep apnea issue is that, while dentists are trained in oral



care and might logically be the ones to confirm the presence of sleep apnea, they are not allowed to diagnose it because sleep apnea is classified as a medical specialty rather than a dental one. Physicians diagnose sleep apnea, but with so many other pressing medical matters during an office visit, only about 9 percent check for sleep apnea — and ultimately, that means throngs of people aren’t getting help. Meanwhile, of all the people worldwide who have the potentially deadly Obstructive Sleep Apnea, 80 percent are men. (Women, too, are afflicted with sleep apnea; however, it is not as common in women as it is in men.)

Because he doesn’t practice general dentistry, dentists know Dr. Klein will send their referrals back to them once diagnosis and treatment have been initiated. It only takes 10 seconds of a general dentist’s or a doctor’s time to determine if

sleep apnea testing is warranted for a patient. A “yes” answer to these three short questions generally determines the next course of action: Do you snore? Do you frequently awaken unrefreshed? Are you tired enough to fall asleep during the day?

Treatment for sleep apnea is relatively simple. While C-pap masks have served as the traditional answer, many people find them cumbersome to use each night. Today, small, inconspicuous appliances have become the more accepted nightly routine for many people.

“I have sleep apnea,” reveals Dr. Klein. “I learned so much about it because I was a patient in search of a solution. I tried the nasal pillows and the different masks. I wore the various sleep appliances and finally found a solution that worked without intrusion. Obstructive Sleep Apnea treatment should be individualized to each person’s needs.”

When sleep apnea or other pain (including TMJ) stubbornly refuses to subside, Dr. Klein has extensive resources to help people feel better — and many of the same resources and treatments have helped him through his own severe pain. When he teaches medical residents at Henry Ford and St. John hospitals, as well as Michigan State Medical

College, he emphasizes this important fact:

“When someone is in pain, they can only handle so much. It’s our responsibility to help them find relief — sooner rather than later.”

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