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Introduction to Oral Medicine

Oral medicine (stomatology) is an important, rapidly developing dental specialty in several countries of the world that recognizes and cultivates the close interplay between oral and systemic health. The spectrum of diseases of oral medicine is wide and includes diseases of the oral mucosa and the gingiva, lip disorders, salivary gland and jaw diseases, temporomandibular joint disorders, malodor, taste changes, orofacial pain, and oral manifestations of systemic diseases (see the schematic classification on the next page). Oral diseases may be *local* or *systemic*, *acute or chronic*, *innocent* or *serious*, *painful* or *not*, and *life-changing or life-threatening*. The oral medicine specialist (stomatologist or oral physician) should collaborate with several *medical specialties* (dermatology, gastroenterology, otorhinolaryngology, hematology, infectiology, immunology, oncology, pediatrics, neurology, psychiatry, internal medicine, pathology, imaging, and head and neck surgery) and with the *dental specialties* (general dentistry, oral surgery, periodontology, implantology, pediatric dentistry, oral pathology, and radiology).

The oral medicine specialist should have a dental and a basic medical background, particularly in internal medicine, dermatology, otorhinolaryngology, pediatrics, clinical pharmacology, therapeutics, histopathology, and others. The general dentist and the medical physician should also have the basic knowledge of oral diseases in order to recognize the primary lesions in the oral cavity and to direct the patient to the oral medicine specialist. The oral cavity, as an examination field, offers important clinical advantages: (a) it is an open cavity readily accessible to inspection and palpation, (b) it is easy to perform a biopsy here, (c) it is regularly examined by the dentist for tooth and gingival problems, and (d) it is accessible to self-examination by the patient. Several diagnostic difficulties exist due to: (a) the plethora of local and systemic diseases with similar lesions and (b) local factors, such as tooth, dentures, foodstuffs, or saliva, which may alter the morphology of the elementary lesions. Clinical diagnostic methodology should follow fundamental principles that we must adhere to in order to arrive at a correct diagnosis. Laboratory tests are a tool that must follow the clinical evaluation. Laboratory results should always be evaluated by the clinician in relation to the clinical features of the disease.

The goal of the oral medicine specialist should be the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of oral diseases.