

Session 1

Geriatric Oral Health Case Study: Terry

Terry (as told by Carol, the daughter of Terry's closest friend, to the Nurse's Aide in the Rehab Center. Carol has not seen Terry in over a year, when Terry moved into her son's house 20 miles away, although they talk on the phone at least once a month. Terry is 85 years old and in a rehabilitation center recovering from emergency arm surgery after a recent fall.

Terry is of a sound mind, and when I last saw her, she could even balance her check book as long as she used the oversized calculator with the big numbers and keypad. I have not seen Terry in a long time, over a year ago, but she looks pretty good and has still kept the weight off she lost over 10 years ago. When Terry lived in Waltham and when my mother was alive, they both loved going to the Waltham Senior Center for all kinds of bus trips, classes, and meals. My mom and Terry both grew up in Waltham, knew each other in High School, and both worked for the Waltham School Department for a long time, in Terry's case, for more than 30 years. She and my mom both married Waltham boys and raised their families there. My mom died seven years ago, and Terry and I made a point to stay in touch. Terry's husband Frank died suddenly 30 years ago of a major heart attack while shoveling snow. Terry was determined to stay independent, frugal, and in the house she and Frank shared. Terry never learned to drive and always prided herself on her ability to get around by bus and her own two feet. Working for the city left her with a good pension and insurance benefits, including dental.

Terry has a few medical conditions. She has Type 2, non-insulin dependent diabetes and high blood pressure which is pretty well controlled by meds. Terry checks her blood sugar daily, watches her salt and sugar intake; however, occasionally, especially at night; she treats herself to something sweet and/or salty from her stash. Terry had quintuple cardiac bypass surgery 10 years ago and recovered nicely, although a few times since then she has been admitted to the hospital for a few days with congestive heart failure. She always tries to keep moving, to keep the blood flowing, but I know it has not been as easy for her lately because she says her feet and hands get stiff and tingly more often.

I know Terry takes an oral medication every day for her diabetes, a daily blood pressure pill, a diuretic (which keeps her close to the bathroom), a couple of meds for her heart, a multi-vitamin with extra calcium and potassium, and something for macular degeneration, the wet kind, she developed three years ago. She tried the treatment for the macular degeneration, and it helped a little, but her peripheral vision is not that good and from what she tells me, it seems to be getting worse. The vision changes have had an impact on her ability to take care of herself, however, she always finds ways to compensate just enough to get by and make due. And all those household things for low vision, like the pill case with big letters, the large remote for the TV, help a lot. Terry is not one to ask for help, though if you ask her, she will take you up on it. She has always said that she does not want to be a bother or a burden to others. She is also pretty private and not one to easily share a lot of personal matters with others, though she did share with my mother. Terry is also quite hard of hearing but

refuses to spend money on a hearing aid, something her medical insurance will not cover and besides, she has heard that most hearing aids are lousy anyway.

Terry has been under the care of good doctors, but all specialists. She is not good at asking questions, or answering questions for that matter because she doesn't always hear what is being asked, and truly believes that the doctor knows best. She does not have a primary care doctor per se, but considers her heart doctor as such. Her eye doctor, diabetes doctor, foot doctor and heart doctor are all in the same medical building in Waltham. Her dentist has an office close by.

Terry's two older children live on the West Coast with their families and check in often by telephone. Her youngest son, Paul, lives in Carlisle, MA, about 20 miles west with his wife, Amy, and their four children, ages 4 to 14 years. Paul's new job involves extensive travel, sometimes two to four weeks at a time, leaving Amy to solo parent the four children. Amy is also taking care of her 18 month old niece, while her sister is going through a tough time. Paul, whenever he could, was always good about driving Terry to her medical and dental appointments. He would always help her get into the building and then either wait for her in the waiting room or out in the car. Paul and Terry rarely discuss the details of her appointments, and simply go to the pharmacy drive-thru for prescriptions.

Terry's "diabetes" doctor retired two years ago, and she does not care much for the young doctor that took over. She is way overdue for her three month dental appointment. Terry knows that she is lucky to have good dental insurance and

certainly has had her share of dental problems over the years. Her family, like mine, was poor growing up. Fluoride was not even discovered yet, and like many of her generation, she only went to the dentist with a toothache. She has had an upper and lower partial for many years, and had had extensive work done to her gums to keep her remaining teeth intact. Although she rinses her partials regularly, she does not feel comfortable leaving them out for extended periods even though the dentist and the hygienist strongly recommend soaking them in water while she sleeps. In fact, she doesn't like for others to know she even has them. Lately, the partials, especially the lower, do not seem to quite fit the way they used to. She says it is harder for her to chew certain foods and she finds herself favoring one side. Using a straw has helped control the sharp pangs she gets when certain foods and drinks touch certain teeth. Lately her mouth feels like cotton is stuck in there.

A little more than a year ago, after a bad fall, Terry went to live at Paul's house at his insistence. It was to have been temporary, but she is still there. Paul and Amy have a big house and Terry has her own room with a big TV, a nice bathroom with a walk in shower and even a kitchenette with a microwave and mini fridge. She told me it is nice being in a house with lots of people around though everyone is always so busy with all their sports and music lessons and school. She really misses her own house, and worries about it. Once the real estate market turns around, Paul will try to sell it. She also misses some of her neighbors and the senior center. There's plenty of food at Paul's house, but not too much to Terry's liking. Amy is so busy with the kids that they often get take

out. Amy is into healthy, naturally sweetened, organic foods, which are okay, but Terry would just really love some pasta or even a hotdog now and then. The kids are also picky eaters, and Amy indulges them, something Terry would never do. One of them eats like a bird, one just gave up meat and gluten, and two will only eat sugary things (that they often share with Terry, much to her delight!). Amy eats pretty well and, when he is not traveling, Paul eats what Amy puts on the table simply to keep the peace. There's bottled water everywhere (even though the tap water always tasted just fine to Terry) and it's always too cold. Terry cannot work the child proof hot water faucet so lets her water get to room temp before drinking it. Amy is so into the natural stuff, that even the toothpaste is organic and free from things like fluoride that Amy insists is bad for you.

Terry has not been feeling well lately, she just feels "off." She doesn't enjoy food like she used to, even with her Tums, and doesn't even enjoy TV like she used to. It's hard to read regular books and magazines, and she has a few with large font and a few books on tape, but they are hard to understand. Sometimes lately she feels a little lightheaded and afraid of falling again, so she just stays put until it passes. She doesn't want to bother Amy too much who is so busy with the kids.

Terry did fall again and is in the Carlisle Rehab Center following surgery to repair her broken arm. It is day one at the Rehab Center and Terry is resting comfortably and chatting as much as she can with the nurse's aide who is on her lunch break. Terry is so grateful that they didn't lose her partials during the surgery. I had the day off so I came out to see her. The nurse's aide is telling me that she feels bad, that Terry seems so sad and that she really misses her house

and the Senior Center. Just then Amy stops by with all of the children: Tyler, age 14, Marissa, age 11, Landen age 9, Katelyn age 4, and niece Amanda, 18 months. When Amy asks how Terry is doing, Terry says that everything is just fine.