

# Study of dentistry as a science of life

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## Abstract

### Study of dentistry as a science of life

This article aims at reflecting on the construction of the identity of the mouth that permeates ethics, poetics, aesthetics and politics in face of some bioethical mandates. A bibliographic consultation from Scielo and Lilacs database, of articles published in domestic and international journals, as well as from most important textbooks published in the past years. It describes mouth as a territory marked by each individual's personal history, been a *border checkpoint* for contacting other individual. It discusses mouth as integral part of the body performing major physiological functions, which are not reduced just to chewing, breathing and speech, but in expressing feelings as well. Finally, it considers that for due study of Dentistry, while science of life, it must exceed the biological dimension focused in the anatomic and physiological features of craniofacial complex, to an understanding of the individual, in his fullness, in a praxis that values both the academic space in the integral professional training and society in the defense of the life.

**Key words:** Oral health. Bioethics. Ethics. Social values.



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The construction of a trans-disciplinary dialogue that promotes health, technical development, and social responsibility from oral health becomes crucial for the individual's well-being actions as an essential mechanism for professional performance when meeting the other in the contemporary world. The Magna Carta, by analogy, supports this brief exposition, assuming the importance of inter-sectorial cooperation in health care, stating the principles of universality, comprehensiveness, and equity in the context of management decentralization and social control, respecting a person's autonomy and freedom. Promoting health involves the possibility of choice in a pluralistic and tolerant environment in defense of life.

In Western culture, knowledge about the body is fragmented, setting apart the fields of biological, mental, and social knowledge. The modern concept

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of disease was established through the analysis of the material structure of the body, studied by anatomical pathology, having as a characteristic a reduction that covers up relationships in motion, emotion, and the uniqueness of individuals. It refers to a lifeless body that does not consider the human being integrally. It states that the care of people is not in consonance with the care of the organs <sup>1</sup>.

The mouth, as member of this body, performs delicate physiological functions vital for the maintenance of health as a whole. It is an organ of absorption of nutrients, essential for physical and mental development, as well as the expression of feelings, of defense, an instrument to claim one's rights, of social justice, of complaints against social inequality and human indignity. Indeed, it is important not to set it apart from the individual, but to reveal the spatial behavior of its various dimensions: physical, social, anthropological, and philosophical.

In this essay, considering the fundamental importance of the mouth, its identity will be built through ethics, poetics, aesthetics, and politics from the perspective of dialogue with bioethics. A journey that begins with human relationships and involves the person's poeticism, and runs tangent to breastfeeding, as well as the social and physiological needs associated with hunger for bread and life. On the way, it meets the aesthetic in a hedonistic reality of superficial relations, fear of pain, to achieve the right to be an individual, who has to know his duties as citizens.

**From ethics to clinical practice**

From macrocosm to microcosm, from collective to individual, from person to mouth. From mouth to teeth that chew, toward the tongue that screams, cries, talks; from mouth to the saliva that lubricates and cleanses; beyond the roof of the mouth,

breathing in a symphony of birth, to live and die, and then to be reborn again in each respiratory movement. From the mouth to a dignified life, from the mouth to death, that shuts down the will to live. An oral identity that is unique and part of an unspeakable total, today and always endowed with an ethical complexity in its social and professional relationships.

To reflect on the ethical issues according to its principles involves considering the Hippocratic physician who treated the patient as *in firmus*, i.e. someone without firmness or moral, but wished him well, even not counting with the patient's will for he did not possess moral autonomy. The Hippocratic model was paternal (when it prevented the patient to decide about the treatment), motherly (to make it a less unpleasant disease) and priestly (to act as mediator with the deity and having power over life and death). This paradigm has contaminated Dentistry for a long time. However, with the advent of a pluralistic society and social changes, the decision of what was *good* in a clinical intervention is determined by something more than the scientific and technical information: it must be in balance with patient's choices and demands, requiring, thus, the need for informed consent <sup>2</sup>.

It seems, therefore, that it is important to discuss the mouth from the standpoint of society. To go beyond an individualistic, monopolistic, curative and socially unjust Dentistry, from an alienated, isolated and discriminated mouth, toward a more autonomous, collective and politicized mouth. The study of the teeth and the mouth, as functional bodies, naturally

arranged, conceal a web of desires and feelings. More than Cartesian science, it is necessary to comprehend the production of subjectivity by the mouth. It is a request that surpasses the limits of Dentistry <sup>3</sup>.

Linking ethical issues to Dentistry, Gonçalves e Verdi <sup>4</sup> show that when we think of bioethics we tend to see extreme situations such as euthanasia, assisted fertilization and recombinant DNA. Dental practice includes ethical conflicts brought by issues such as the advent of HIV / AIDS, the trade of human teeth, the research that discovers new techniques and biomaterials, the paradox between public health policies and social justice and the constant pursuit of human and ethical principles of respect in the professional-patient relationship. The authors showed that in the process of access to clinical teaching, the use of patients as backup and attention for the privileged expose the disrespect of the principle of autonomy for those who are waiting for their turn.

The patient should have the right to refuse certain procedures without consequences in the continuity of his treatment. However, the way in which authorization for treatment is obtained, binds directly his signing in with access to the service. The practice adopted by some disciplines to maintain their own files and exclusive access can refer the patient unnecessarily to the repetition of radiographic procedures. The minimum production required from the students for some courses may also expose patients to unnecessary risks and raises doubts on how their needs are treated when they conflict with academic production.

It is necessary to discuss and rethink the practice of teaching as humanized and humanizing, trying to reconcile academic interests with the needs of the patient and not prioritize one over the other, drawing upon the dignity of human life as the first and last of values.

Thus, the ethical debate that permeates the identity of the mouth brings to the arena of dentistry challenges that is not trapped in a clinic in a paternalistic relationship between the professional and patient. It must be able to include society and promote science for reflection regarding the production of behaviors and standards in the service of the human community, applying untouchable principles such as respect for autonomy, justice, tolerance, and freedom.

### **Beyond the palate as human being's poetics**

The idea of *person* refers to the entity made to the image and likeness of God, who is Greek hypostasis, unique and unrepeatable, divine icon, a whole man who is born, grows and dies; sanctuary, where the divine wisdom becomes apparent. This being is endowed with its own language manifested in blood pressure, heart rate, temperature, balance, fatigue <sup>5</sup>. Extrapolating the author's words, an own language also imprinted in facial expression, the smile, the tears, the gnashing of teeth, yawning, in the way he speaks, in the way he chews, therefore, a language in itself, symbolic, a *buccality* reflecting the importance of living and taking care of the body.

In this sacred territory, breastfeeding constitutes an ancient act of natural and cultural character natural built from cultural values and social relations that update new routines and feeding habits, comprising mothers, children and society. Breastfeeding is a special moment of deep intimacy between mother and child, involving touch, comfort, speech and all possible forms of mother-infant communication. The mother passes to the baby psychic, cultural and trans-generational contents in such a way that breastfeeding is not restricted only to giving milk, but accomplishes all the emotional investment that gives meaning to existence of the child <sup>6</sup>.

Breastfeeding reduces infant morbidity and mortality, provides ideal nourishment to the infant – favoring its growth – and enables valuable savings of resources for families and society <sup>7,8</sup>. Additionally, it provides greater interaction between mother and child <sup>9</sup>. Moreover, breastfeeding is identified as a determinant for proper craniofacial development, with positive repercussions for the body, promoting intense exercise of the oral facial muscles, favorably stimulating the functions of respiration, chewing, swallowing, and speech<sup>10-14</sup>. It reveals, thus from an integral viewpoint, as experiencing love within a sacred territory, which is not consumed in the encounter with the other.

Another consideration derived from the mouth also expresses its own language, but often imprisoned. Domesticated by unhealthy foods, but readily accessible,

easy to chew, ideal for the fastest possible swallowing, in a routine of this globalized world of *fast food, fast life*. A mouth without teeth is a toothless mouth that excludes the individual from social life. In order to live the shallowness of sensations, food is eaten quickly, without tasting the nourishing element that should be previously prepared, chewed, crushed before it reaches the digestive system, and from then on, enabling physiological energy for various bodily functions. This process destroys the art of eating, to feel the taste, the scents.

In the contemporary scenario, Fiats and collaborators <sup>15</sup> reported that children remain approximately four hours and forty-five minutes per day in front of a television set, which has the power to promote consumption, influencing their eating habits. These preferences are increasingly distant from nutritional recommendations, triggering the rise of obesity. In this pilot study, the authors drew attention to the emergence of an educational strategy that promotes healthy eating habits along reducing the exposure of children to television.

It becomes evident that the oral cavity, as one of the most vital routes of entry for the organism, is of the most richly innervated areas, and perhaps, the most richly diversified. When the contemporary lifestyle calls for the interference of Dentistry, it is to promote the social and morph-functional re-establishment of this functioning buccal space, targeting the care and preservation of this identity.

### **Aesthetic conception of the mouth**

The mouth is a place of multiple meanings and carries meanings that become present in the culture and the human psyche: chewing, eroticism, language <sup>16</sup>. The desires to live forever with pleasure and no pain, and being beautiful are now inherent to human subjectivity, and probably they have been since health was associated to quality of life and pleasure. The capitalist system stimulates the consumption of health services (or the medicalization of life) not for the realization of a human desire, but for the realization of a fetish, a fantasy created by the system just in order to consider the health services as a private product. From this analysis, we could then consider that it is not the wish of being beautiful and living with pleasure without pain and forever that constitute the fetish, but the fantasy sustained by the propaganda that these desires can be satisfied when you buy the product *health* <sup>17</sup>.

This new reality triggers the sophistication of superficiality. With specializations occurred a greater detachment from reality, from the other, requiring a real encounter between us, in the sense of a micro politics of care, given the will to preserve, *to take care of yourself and others*. We can then speak, then, of the lack of sensibility, because the time devoted to listening and perceiving the other becomes a fleeting scene, the feeding the monsters of fast foods, of banality, that deceives our hunger for real participation in the real world where we exist, in the primary search for the suppression of symptoms<sup>18</sup>.

The questioning of which mouth we are really taking care of becomes urgent at a time when the person is suffocated by the world of money, lost in the web of consumer machine use, instrument, and technicality at the expense of satiating physical and social hunger.

### **Buccality and politics in the art of dialogue**

The human mouth is a space, a territory of politics. As ways of organizing practice, to design services, producing discourses about the patient, to organize the teaching and also to make science. And there could be no paradigm in this place, because the discourse is not a discourse of science: in its place, an *ideology of the scientist* (managers, of entities, of the dentists). Reflects about Dentistry and its biological character that refers only about teeth, their illnesses, and treatment and which value the concept of function in order to find average adaptation rules, which are cultural configurations <sup>16</sup>.

Før lyda <sup>19</sup>, to politicize dentistry is to realize that the dental act is a social, economic, ideological, and political phenomenon. It must be understood that social reality comprises relationships, processes and structures not always visible, but that must be discovered by creating a new reality. Buccality also as the art of dialogue, therefore, in its

sense of giving voice to the suffering of others, to expand and reinvent Dentistry, so that we can subsidize a more human professional intervention, not only in the sense of accepting the sick person, but to understand the impact that the lack of oral health causes in his/her life.

### **Final considerations**

In the construction of oral identity in the contemporary world, it must be realized that health is no longer needed and hence becomes a desire. Therefore, academic training should focus on this social reality with an integral vision of the patient, bringing ethics to daily practice, where academia and the clinic become privileged spaces for technical learning, thus loathing trivialized perfectionism in the exercise of reflection of future professionals.

For the time being, the mouth remains mechanized, merchandized, in the shop window of a hedonistic society with consumerist and media-born smiles excited by the technicality that entrapped it. Therefore, Dentistry should suggest changes in the university, in government management, in income distribution, with healthful implications throughout society. It is for this area to establish an identity for the mouth that shall collaborate in building a more human future, based on an ethical, poetical aesthetical and political reflection.

## Resumen

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### Estudio de la Odontología como ciencia de vida

El artículo tiene por objetivo reflejar la construcción de la identidad de la boca, que ultrapasa la ética, la poética, la estética y la política frente a algunos dictámenes bioéticos. Fue realizada una consulta bibliográfica a partir del banco de datos de Scielo y Lilacs, de artículos publicados en revistas científicas nacionales e internacionales, así como de los libros de texto más importantes editados en los últimos años. Describe la boca como un territorio marcado por la historia de la persona humana, siendo *puesto fronterizo* del contacto con los demás. La discute como integrante del cuerpo que desempeña importantes funciones fisiológicas importantes que no se limitan únicamente a la masticación, la respiración y el habla, sino también como una expresión de los sentimientos. Finalmente, considera que, para el debido estudio de la Odontología como ciencia de vida ésta debe ultrapasar la dimensión biológica centrada en los aspectos anatómicos y fisiológicos del complejo cráneo-facial, para una comprensión de la persona en su totalidad, en una praxis que valoriza tanto el espacio académico en la formación integral del profesional como la sociedad en defensa de la vida.

**Palabras-clave:** Salud bucal. Bioética. Ética. Valores sociales.

## Resumo

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### O estudo da Odontologia como ciência da vida

O artigo objetiva refletir a construção da identidade da boca, que perpassa a ética, a poética, a estética e a política diante de alguns ditames bioéticos. Foi realizada uma consulta bibliográfica a partir do banco de dados do Scielo e Lilacs, de artigos publicados em revistas científicas nacionais e internacionais, bem como dos livros-texto mais importantes editados nos últimos anos. Descreve a boca como um território marcado pela história de cada pessoa humana, sendo *posto de fronteira* do contato com o outro. Discute-a como integrante do corpo no qual desempenha funções fisiológicas importantes que não se reduzem apenas à mastigação, respiração e fala, mas também à expressão de sentimentos. Por fim, considera que, para o devido estudo da Odontologia enquanto ciência da vida, ela deve ultrapassar a dimensão biológica centrada nos aspectos anatómicos e fisiológicos do complexo craniofacial, para uma compreensão da pessoa em sua totalidade, numa práxis que valoriza tanto o espaço acadêmico na formação integral do profissional como a sociedade na defesa da vida.

**Palavras-chave:** Saúde bucal. Ética. Bioética. Valores sociais.

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### **Authors' participation in the work**

Maria Julia is the main author, Alquermes Valvassori, co-author, contributed significantly with the design and planning of the article. Reinaldo Ayer, co-author also contributed significantly in critical review of the content.