



Teeth: The Story of Beauty, Inequality, and the Struggle for Oral Health in America

Mary Otto

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“Show me your teeth,” the great naturalist Georges Cuvier is credited with saying, “and I will tell you who you are.” In this shattering new work, veteran health journalist Mary Otto looks inside America’s mouth, revealing unsettling truths about our unequal society.

Teeth takes readers on a disturbing journey into America’s silent epidemic of oral disease, exposing the hidden connections between tooth decay and stunted job prospects, low educational achievement, social mobility, and the troubling state of our public health. Otto’s subjects include the pioneering dentist who made Shirley Temple and Judy Garland’s teeth sparkle on the silver screen and helped create the all-American image of “pearly whites”; Deamonte Driver, the young Maryland boy whose tragic death from an abscessed tooth sparked congressional hearings; and a marketing guru who offers advice to dentists on how to push new and expensive treatments and how to keep Medicaid patients at bay.

In one of its most disturbing findings, *Teeth* reveals that toothaches are not an occasional inconvenience, but rather a chronic reality for millions of people, including disproportionate numbers of the elderly and people of color. Many people, Otto reveals, resort to prayer to counteract the uniquely devastating effects of dental pain.

Otto also goes back in time to understand the roots of our predicament in the history of dentistry, showing how it became separated from mainstream medicine, despite a century of growing evidence that oral health and general bodily health are closely related.

Muckraking and paradigm-shifting, *Teeth* exposes for the first time the extent and meaning of our oral health crisis. It joins the small shelf of books that change the way we view society and ourselves—and will spark an urgent conversation about why our teeth matter.

Teeth: The Story of Beauty, Inequality, and the Struggle for Oral Health in America Details

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Lauren says

Ahhhh I really wanted to like this book more because the message couldn't be more true; we do need to give greater focus to dental health. I just felt that Otto continuously repeated herself in regards to the failing dental health system while also not providing any specific solutions on how it could be fixed. I think if more time was spent describing the various ailments (which most non-dentist/dental assistant/hygenists readers are unfamiliar with) I would've been more engaged and had a better sense of the ramifications for neglecting certain treatments or types of preventative care. Than this laywoman could help spread the word by citing these examples. Instead I felt like I was slogging through all the specific failures of the bigger system, of which, as an individual, I feel like I very little direct control over.

Catherine says

I purchased this book because it was inspired by the story of Deamonte Driver, a 12 year old PG County boy who died in 2007 of a brain infection from an abscessed tooth. That story, in the Washington Post, really hit my mother hard. She was livid that such a thing could happen. This book, by the Post reporter, tells Deamonte's story, the story of how dentistry became divided from medicine, and how oral health is a cause and consequence of societal inequality - not an area often discussed. Highly recommend.

Steven says

This is such a good example of medical journalism.

Otto explores issues related to oral health in the United States - how dentistry developed, current controversies, and the poor state of oral health among Americans who have the least. It's hard to know who's doorstep to place this problem at, but Otto points at several factors.

The way dentistry developed as a separate profession has developed in professionals who jealously guard their autonomy in the healthcare system. Too, dentists are reluctant to support changes in professional practice that would give more autonomy to dental hygienists or allow the development of mid-level dental professionals like the dental therapists being employed by some Native American groups. The problems with the way healthcare is funded (or rather, not funded) in this country is magnified for dentistry and oral health, as these are often underfunded by a hodgepodge of state policies toward Medicaid. And just the sheer numbers are daunting -- not enough dentists in many of the areas of the country. Or at least not enough willing to accept poor patients.

So many interesting topics are covered in this book -- new dental health delivery models, the rise of dental insurance, how poverty and race continue to be barriers to treatment and the development of dental professions, conflicts and tensions between dentists and hygienists over their roles, the fact that dentistry and its economics are set up as a restorative (and now cosmetic) profession rather than one of prevention, and just the plain lack of access.

Otto's writing is fairly clinical at times, and much of her coverage concerns Maryland, a kind of lab school for the best and worst of dental health -- and the home of the oldest dental college in the world. A fact she mentions perhaps a few too many times...Still, an excellent overview. And as the sad and completely avoidable fate of Deamonte Driver illustrates in the book, a story that really needs to be heard. I'll be getting a copy of this for my library and recommending it to our dental hygiene students.

Jessica says

I always notice people's teeth - it's something I learned from my Dad. And as Georges Cuvier is credited with saying, "Show me your teeth and I will tell you who you are." Mary Otto examines both the history of dentistry in America and also how it continues to be a barometer of social inequality. Otto started working on this book after Deamonte Driver, who was 12 years old, died from an infected tooth that spread to his brain. Unfortunately Deamonte isn't unique in that children and adults still routinely die from infected teeth because of lack of access to dental care. One of the things I found most disturbing is how time and again people or groups - across different time periods and parts of the country - would try to create ways to bring preventative dental care to poor children in schools and be sued and fought tooth and nail by dentists. The dentists claim this would take business away from them, but these children are not getting ANY dental care and preventative care could help prevent massive problems for these kids in the future. While there were parts of the book that were very interesting, it was not arranged in a cohesive way. I wish it had flowed a little more naturally, but it was choppy and history was mixed in with current events and it was often hard to follow. But, I think she did do a good job of showing how dental health is equally important as overall physical health and our country is seriously lacking in dental care for a large part of the population.

Some quotes I liked:

"In Illinois, a team of research assistants posed as the mother of a fictitious child with a broken front tooth. They phoned eighty-five Illinois dental practices twice, a month apart, in an attempt to determine whether a child's Medicaid status affected a parent's ability to get a dental appointment. In 170 paired calls, a total of 36.5 percent of the Medicaid children obtained an appointment, compared with 95.4 percent of privately insured children." (p. 122)

"Alaska Native children suffer from tooth decay that has been estimated at rates more than twice as high as other American children. In Alaska, complete tooth loss by the age of twenty is not uncommon." (p. 173)

Doug says

Going to the dentist is something I have always simply taken for granted. But it seems I am in the minority. Due to medical culture, politics, and poverty, oral health is much less available to large portions of the US population than regular medical care. This for me was an eye-opening book and is a must-read for all who care about health, especially our children's health. Readable and well-researched.

Peter Degallier says

Inspirational

As a future dental professional, I found this book so moving and inspiring. I hope that these pages will continue to help me aspire to use my training and career to help those in need.

Anna says

3.5 rounded up because of the importance of the message. The book tells the story not of teeth but of dentistry where it has been, where it is now and where it needs to go in the future. This book by turns made me sad, angry, frustrated and it also often made me squirm. I could never be a dentist or hygienist but I now have a much greater respect for those who are and for the importance and nobility of these professions.

Malin Friess says

Otto begins with a moving poem about teeth which I will paraphrase-

"The mouth is a portal, an interface, an erogenous zone...the grotto of the tongue...the teeth are part animal, and part mineral...they are whitened, straightened, amputated, and thrown away....Teeth endure longer than bone, withstand fires, floods, time....they keep a record of our lives, locked in their enamel."

As a dentist who has practiced for over 14 years teeth are no joke! It is about time we had a book that took a serious look at our profession, the connection between oral health and systemic health, and the troubling state of oral health in poor American inner cities.

72 million Americans are covered under Medicaid. But it is up to the States to decide whether dental benefits are included. 35 Million poor children have Medicaid benefits..but only 1/2 receive dental care. In 2007 a Maryland Schoolboy Deamonte Driver died of complications from an untreated dental infection just 12 miles from the Nation's first dental school: University of Maryland. From 200-2009 61,439 hospitalizations were attributed to dental abscesses at a cost of \$858 million dollars (something a simple tooth extraction could have prevented).

Otto takes a journey into the mouth to look at the connections of oral disease and decreased job prospects (no one gets hired if they are missing a front tooth), low educational achievement (kids can't perform if they have a chronic toothache). Dentistry unfortunately evolved separately from medical schools as a cottage industry or a trade (much like a barber) and not a profession. Therefore the teeth have been separated from the body and often not included in important health care legislation. Even though there are correlations between the bacteria of the mouth and oral infection and diabetes, Coronary Heart Disease, failing orthopedic joint replacements, and rheumatoid arthritis and periodontal disease, and kids with otitis media and chronic dental abscesses...dental care is treated as a luxury.

I would suggest ED's who have dental patients..stop and have them triaged at the door (rather than wasting money on medical codes an unneeded imaging/CT scans that can often range over \$500) and are given a voucher (paid for by Medicaid or CHIPS) to visit a dentist or OMFS and have the tooth treated.

Otto takes some swipes at dentists as a profession that is too surgical minded (we always want to pick up a hand-piece and drill) when preventative care is more important (sealants and F- and oral hygiene instruction). I think this is unfounded..believe me I have treated children and adults--and just speaking about

improved brushing or placing a few sealants or painting f- on teeth--will do nothing when they have a PA infection with irreversible pulpitis and are in need of surgical extraction of offending teeth or first step root canal therapy).

Otto is right to note that midlevel providers (dental therapists) could help solve the access problems. These providers who are now qualified to practice at Indian reservations in Alaska, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington and Minneapolis have 2-3 years of training and can treat simple cavities and extract primary teeth. Dental boards are adamantly opposed that these providers are endangering patients and not qualified (or the underlying reason is that they will suck up revenue from general dentists). These therapists need to be given a chance...because they are going places (like bush towns in Alaska) where no dentists are available.

5 stars. All dentists and dental students should read this book. Teeth matter and our profession can do better job meeting the oral health crisis.

Ursula Johnson says

A Biting Commentary on the State of Oral Care

I saw the audiobook version of this book as a daily deal selection. The topic was interesting and the reviews were very positive. I am familiar with a large portion of this book, having already been aware of how medical insurance and care far exceed dental care and insurance. Nearly everyone I know has had a toothache at one point or another. Most people do not have dental insurance or kid themselves that they won't need it. You will need to go, it's just a matter of time.

Still portions of this book were real eye openers. The ADA's fight against dental hygienists, the marketing guru teaching dentists how to push services that may not be needed are just a few. I was aware of the lack of dentists not participating in Medicaid because of the low reimbursement rates, how the poor go untreated and the push for coverage and care for children. The deaths of several mentioned in this book were preventable. The sad case of Deamonte Driver was used as a rallying cry for more coverage for children. A good third of this book covered children's care and the lack thereof, though improvements have been made.

Despite this, coverage for adults is virtually non existent. I would've liked to have read more about the challenges of coverage for adults. The cost of dental care is often worse than medical in some cases, even with insurance you still have to pay a growing share of fees.

A biting commentary, this book is an excellent read. I read this using Immersion Reading, while listening to the audiobook. The narrator was superb, a beautiful voice with the perfect amount of emotion.

Diana says

I'm kind of meh about this book. It seemed scattered and disjointed and repetitive to me. A lot of it was dry history and dry policy. It focused on the state of Maryland. Surprisingly to me there wasn't much on the physiology of teeth or the mechanism by which neglect of oral care damages overall health beyond the

extreme cases where sepsis occurs due to dental infections. The author half heartedly argues dental care should be part of medical care rather than separate but doesn't really make this case.

Gregory Marchese says

This book is phenomenal. I rarely will want to slow down while reading, but I found myself wanting to reread segments over and over immediately after finishing it.

Holly McIntyre says

As a middle-class boomer I have been blessed to consider regular dental visits an expected, if unenjoyable, fact of life. Despite liberal application of Crest, my childhood teeth untouched by fluoridated water sported enormous amalgam fillings which over time have come to depict a veritable history of 20th and 21st century crowning procedures. Never once have I had a toothache. Until reading this book, I did not know how atypical my experience has been.

A weakness of this book is that it tries to cover so much that often the thematic connections do not hold. The sweep moves from the history of dentistry, to professional infighting, to the money-making potential of cosmetic dentistry, to the complex policies of Medicaid, interspersed with vignettes of real people and their teeth. In the end, it is the vignettes that I will remember, especially the death of 12 year-old Deamonte Driver from an abscessed tooth.

This book explicates how and why dental health care is unavailable to at least one-third of Americans and for that enlightenment alone is well worth reading.

Chris D'Antonio says

Teeth provides a compelling survey of the history of dental care, and several present day case studies which are pushing the frontier of dental care into populations which receive very little of it. It covers the glamorous nature of modern cosmetic dentistry, and uses it to contrast the failure to extend basic dental care reliably to poor populations throughout the United States. The separation of dentistry and physical medicine and its absurdity is highlighted, and the role it has played in diminishing dental care funding in public health programs such as CHIP and Medicaid. Efforts to extend more affordable care are explored through dental therapists serving Alaska Natives, dental hygienists seeing more independence and versatility in South Carolina, and past movements to create dental auxiliaries, much of which has been opposed by the American Dental Association as a threat to dentist's privileged economic well-being. The ADA figures prominently as a force of reaction, fighting against innovation and new approaches attempting to expand dental care. The book ends on remembrances of the deaths of two young children from infections stemming from wholly preventable tooth decay, and challenges us to do better. I think it accomplishes its aim admirably and gives us much to discuss about improving our system of dental care, and its reach.

Joanne says

Very interesting facts but the book could have been much shorter as the author keeps repeating the same ideas over and over again.

Jonathan says

Teeth matter a lot in contemporary society--for basic health reasons, obviously, but more noticeably as a signifier of class and status. Bad teeth can betray the poverty of their owner. And at the same time that dental care is so essential to basic health (people literally die from diseases originating in rotting teeth) to social mobility, one would think that the US would treat dental insurance/care as a right. But alas, that's not the US we have. Instead, we have one in which teeth are treated as separate from the rest of the head (let alone the body), and in which tens of millions of Americans go without dental care.

Mary Otto, a health journalist at the Washington Post, covered the story of a young boy in Maryland (Deamonte Driver), whose abscessed tooth ended up leading to his death because dental care was out of reach for his family. In her informative and accessibly written "Teeth," Otto explores the forces that could have led to such a tragic outcome: the inequality in access to care (both in terms of insurance and in terms of availability of dentists--not to mention the legacies of slavery still apparent in racial inequities), the history of dentistry that leads it to be separate from the rest of medicine, the political history of dentists and dental insurance.

As it has been for the past century, powerful forces in the US are militating against guaranteeing universality in care. Otto's book shows the consequences of treating health care as a privilege, not as a right.
