

22 Cavities. One Conversation That Changed Everything.

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My patient was a dairy farmer in her 70s whom I'd treated for many years. Nearly 20 years earlier, I'd restored her mouth, and she'd done beautifully ever since. She had beautiful teeth, took good care of them, and wasn't someone I expected to see back with new decay.

So when she came in for her annual checkup with 22 new cavities, I honestly didn't know what to make of it. At the time, I was just beginning to understand that cavities don't simply happen. Something changes. The question isn't, "How many cavities does this patient have?" The question is, "Why did this happen?"

I sat down with her and went through a caries risk assessment. As we talked, the pieces started coming together. She had developed severe hay fever and had recently been placed on strong antihistamine medications. The medications left her mouth extremely dry, so she was sucking on lemon drops throughout the day to get some relief.

That combination changed everything. The dry mouth dramatically reduced her natural protection against decay, and the constant acid and sugar exposure from the lemon drops created the perfect environment for cavities. The part that has always stayed with me wasn't the diagnosis. It was what happened next.

At that point in my career, I didn't have the communication skills I have today. I understood what was happening, but I wasn't able to help her understand it. She left my practice believing I was simply recommending more dentistry. She didn't come back for two years.

When she finally returned, she had only eight teeth remaining. She apologized and told me she'd thought I was just trying to make more money. That conversation has stayed with me throughout my career because I realized the failure wasn't simply that the disease progressed. The failure was that I hadn't helped my patient understand why it was happening.

That patient changed the way I practice dentistry.

Today, every patient completes a caries risk assessment because I never again want to miss the opportunity to identify what's driving the disease before it's too late. Whether it's dry mouth from medications, dietary habits, biofilm, or another risk factor, the goal is to uncover the cause and build a personalized plan that addresses it.

Restoring teeth is important. Helping patients understand why they're getting cavities in the first place is what changes outcomes.



Dr. V. Kim Kutsch is a dentist, inventor, and educator who has made significant contributions to dentistry, earning a DMD from the University of Oregon School of Dentistry and an undergraduate degree from Westminster College. Holder of seventeen patents, he is an internationally recognized speaker and past president of esteemed dental organizations, as well as a Scientific Advisor of Dental Caries at the prestigious Kois Center. He has authored numerous articles and textbook chapters, sharing his expertise and shaping the field. As CEO of Oral BioTech, he continues to lead and innovate, and with 42 years of clinical practice, his impact on dentistry is immeasurable.