Transcript – Linda Ferraro Interview
At Home in Connecticut
November 17, 2013

Announcer: You're listening to At Home in Connecticut. You're guide to all aspects of daily living in Connecticut, hosted by Bill Pearce and produced by WTIC, NewsTalk 1080

Bill Pearce: Good morning, and welcome to the program. My guest this morning is Linda Ferraro, who's Director of the Office of Oral Health at the Connecticut Department of Public Health. And as you might guess, oral health is going to be the subject this morning. Linda, good morning and welcome.

Linda Ferraro: Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Bill: Well we're very pleased to have you here to talk about oral health and I guess recently there was a survey, the first of its kind regarding dental health particularly among the older population of Connecticut. How, what did the results of that show?

Linda: Well, the results of this survey that we did, and yes it was the first time we conducted a survey of this type for, in particular vulnerable older adults – those most at risk for oral diseases. The survey did reveal that we do have some issues, in particular with residents of nursing homes. They have a very high rate of untreated decay. This is something that we've been looking at and we're working towards; hopefully making some improvements in this situation.

Bill: It would seem that in a facility like that, that would not be a problem. Is this neglected? It is something that people just view as perhaps not as important as other issues?

Linda: Well, I think in general Bill, you know, oral health doesn't always rise to the top of the priority list. This is something that, you know, it's not necessarily something I would call neglect; but it's just something that a lot of people just aren't aware of how important oral health is.

Bill: And it is because it potentially can affect so many other things.

Linda: Absolutely, absolutely. Take diabetes for instance. Somebody who is a diabetic and they have poor oral health – they would have a hard time controlling their blood sugar. So this is certainly –the mouth is connected to the rest of the body. A lot of people don't see that or understand that so we're working to try to make sure that message gets out to people.

Bill: Okay. And how are you doing that?

Linda: Well, we're actually currently doing a pilot study in a nursing facility to help increase the awareness of the importance of oral health and also providing some education to the nursing staff so that they can help care for the residents, in particular those that can't care for their own oral health. This is something they're not always aware of for themselves, not only for the residents they care for but how to take care of their own oral health.

Bill: Exactly. And I have yet to find too many people who enjoy going to the dentist. It's one of those things that, as we've said, can affect so many other things and I guess if you do neglect it you'll not only be seeing the dentist, you'll be seeing specialist and other doctors as well.

Linda: Exactly, exactly. And I think the message that, you know, we preach is that prevention is the key. By preventing oral diseases you're going to save a lot of money; you're going to save your health in a lot of ways. So it's really all about prevention and most oral diseases are preventable. It doesn't take much. Brushing your teeth twice a day and flossing and that goes a long way to help make sure that your overall health is intact.

Bill: It truly is and as far as dental caries you say, it really is – oral health is something relatively simple to keep up with, but obviously you do need to be checked on a regular basis. Is there any kind of a set schedule? Does it depend on the person how often they see their dentist?

Linda: If somebody has an annual dental exam, if they're healthy – that's usually enough, but it really does depend on the individual.

Bill: Mm-hmm.

Linda: Some people do require more frequent visits to the dentist. And that is something that really has to be discussed with your dental provider, and your medical provider as well.

Bill: And the other difficulty for some people is dental insurance or as many dentists will tell you, it's not really insurance, it's more a discount program.

Linda: Absolutely. Absolutely. Dental insurance, though it is a good predictor of somebody accessing dental care, it does not solve all the problems. It doesn't cover everything.

Bill: And catastrophic, like regular health insurance would cover catastrophic events to a degree, a much greater degree than dental insurance does.

Linda: Absolutely. Absolutely. But there again, most dental coverage does cover for preventive visits and you can do a lot by going to the dentist for those preventive visits and save a lot on the other end.

Bill: This is a particular problem among the older population. Have you done any research at all involving younger people in Connecticut at this point?

Linda: No, we've done a couple studies on children – children in elementary school and preschool. So we have conducted those types of surveys but not in the general population. It's difficult to really do this type of survey because this is an open mouth survey where we go in, hygienists take a look at what the oral cavity, you know, looks like, and in your general population it's kind of hard capture a particular group of people to do this with. But that's something that at some point we may be entertaining.

Bill: And obviously, the younger you start good oral care, oral health, hopefully that carries over into your adult years-

Linda: Absolutely,

Bill: whether you are in a nursing home or not.

Linda: Absolutely, we recommend and the American Dental Association, American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that a child go to the dentist by age 1. A lot of people hear that and think 'why should we start so early?' Well, if you start early, you do have the chance to prevent a lot of issues. We know that children that have poor oral health do have a lifetime of risk for poor oral health as they get older. So across the lifespan, this is something that is important. And you're right, if you start early, you could probably make sure that somebody is going to stay healthy.

Bill: And actually get yourself into the habit of doing this because it becomes normal.

Linda: Absolutely, you know, if you wait 'til a child is 5 years old to take him to the dentist, they could already have fears associated with this. And if you start out early when they don't have any problems, it's a fun activity.

Bill: And I'm not going to say going to the dentist always is without pain, because sometimes there can be, but remembering the way it used to be – going to the dentist – there are far more things available to them to minimize or even eliminate the pain while they're doing their work.

Linda: Absolutely, absolutely. And that's, you know, there again, if you prevent some of these problems, you're not going to have the issues of having to deal with pain.

Bill: Oh, absolutely. And this survey is going on for how long?

Linda: Well this was a survey that we conducted in 2012.

Bill: Okay.

Linda: So this is something that, you know, has been completed. But our activities will continue as we look into ways to, you know, help improve the overall health – and overall health and well-being of older adults.

Bill: Okay. Are there plans for any more surveys at this point?

Linda: This type of survey is usually completed once every 3 to 5 years.

Bill: Okay.

Linda: So that's something that, you know, we would be looking at a little bit farther down the road.

Bill: If there is some place that people could go to get more information on what we're talking about this morning, Linda, what would that be?

Linda: They could go to our website and that's www.ct.gov/dph/oralhealth.

Bill: All right. Very good. Thank you Linda.

Linda: Thank you.

Bill: You're welcome. And that is Linda Ferraro, who is director at the Office of Oral Health at the state Department of Public Health. That's our program for this morning. I'm Bill Pearce. Join me again next Sunday.

Transcribed by the Connecticut Department of Public Health Office of Oral Health.