Title: ‘Carry not a picke-tooth in your mouth’: an exploration of oral health in early-modern writings

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Abstract: This thesis is an exploration of various aspects of oral health in the early-modern period. It examines evidence taken from texts belonging to a range of genres including surgical manuals, botanical texts, midwifery manuals, poets and plays. Building on existing academic work relating to the history of dentistry and venereal disease, it aims to assimilate material from across science and the arts in order to gain a sense of what general social expectations were in relation to the condition of the teeth and palate, and how people suffering with a decline in oral health were advised, or what treatments were available to them either from a professional or in the home. It aims to challenge existing preconceptions that people living in this period displayed a negligent attitude towards the health of their teeth and oral hygiene. The thesis contains four chapters which each focus on a different aspect of oral health, though many themes recur across all four chapters. The first chapter investigates advice that was available in print, and therefore likely to be in public consciousness, to the early-modern individual in relation to maintaining their teeth. It then considers the portrayal of unattractive teeth and bad breath in early-modern literature. Chapter Two deals with early-modern explanations of what caused the toothache and how it could be remedied. Analysis of the depictions of toothache in various poetry and plays follows in order to explore how wider society made sense of medical thinking at the time. The palate becomes the sole focus of Chapter Three, which considers what specific health concerns posed a threat to the condition of the roof of the mouth, and what difficulties could arise for the individual whose palate has been damaged by disease or injury. The thesis concludes with a chapter which investigates the history of a congenital oral birth defect, the cleft lip and palate. The thesis was designed to allow each chapter to deal with a separate facet of oral health; they encompass in turn: oral hygiene, dental pain, the impact of disease on the palate and an exploration of an oral birth defect.

An undercurrent of the thesis is to use a range of material to ascertain a realistic idea of what it was like for an individual to experience oral health difficulties in this period. It is therefore interested in how society perceived people who were experiencing problems with their oral health, and what could be done to improve their quality of life. The research presented here represents a contribution to the field of the history of oral health and aims to provoke further questions relating to the responsibility early-modern individuals took for their own oral health, and the specific situations in which intervention, either surgical or medicinal, was deemed necessary.

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