College of Dentistry Keeps Athletes Smiling

The University of Memphis women’s basketball team 2008–2009 prepares to have impressions made of their teeth for custom mouth guards at the College of Dentistry.

The University of Memphis women’s basketball team will showcase more than a new head coach during the upcoming 2008–2009 season. The young women will also sport custom-made mouth guards constructed at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center College of Dentistry. UT Health Science Center and the University of Memphis are collaborating in an effort to reduce dental costs and help preserve the athletes’ teeth. Baseball and basketball account for half of all sports-related mouth injuries. According to the International Academy for Sports Dentistry, more than $500 million is spent each year on replacing teeth that are knocked out during games. On October 8, nine U of M student-athletes enthusiastically arrived on the fifth floor of the Dunn Dental Building to have impressions made of their upper teeth. Mark R. Patters, DDS, PhD, interim dean of the College of Dentistry, and Russell Wicks, DDS, MS, associate professor in the Department of Restorative Dentistry, were both on hand to extend a warm welcome to the players.

A UT dental student also greeted each U of M student-athlete, ushering them into the Graduate Prosthodontics Clinic. In the clinic, dental impressions were made by a host of prosthodontic residents, dental students and clinic staff members. The impression process takes about 10 minutes once a patient reaches the chair. Then there is a waiting period of one week for completion of the mouth guard.

The number of sports-related mouth injuries managed by the College of Dentistry is between 10 and 15 per year. Predoctoral dental students and postdoctoral dental residents in all specialty areas are involved in treating such cases.

“We are very fortunate to have the ability to utilize the services of the UT Health Science Center to protect our University of Memphis women’s basketball student-athletes,” said head coach Melissa McBerrin. “As we go out and compete, we can rest assured that our players’ risk for dental-related injuries has been decreased through our use of custom-made mouth guards.”

“Mouth guards are extremely effective in preventing sports-related oral injuries,” noted David Cagna, DMD, MS, professor in the Department of Restorative Dentistry and director for the Graduate Prosthodontics Program. “The obvious ‘best solution’ is to institute effective preventive measures,” he observed. “History tells us that custom-made mouth guards work best.”

Dr. Cagna explained that many sports injuries result in tissue damage, which often leads to long-term dental management problems.

Drs. Cagna and Wicks provided experience supervision as UT prosthodontic residents and dental students worked with each of the basketball players.

Dentists estimate that between 13 and 39 percent of dental injuries occur while playing sports. According to a 1997 study published in the Journal of Pediatric Dentistry, three times as many mouth injuries occur on the basketball court as on the football field. One reason is the fact that the use of mouth guards in all levels of football was fully mandated in 1974. Even though mouth and face injuries account for a significant percentage of basketball injuries, mouth guards are not yet mandatory.

To decrease the possibility of a dental injury that could have lifelong effects, Dr. Cagna recommends custom-made mouth guards for all levels of basketball – intramural, college, professional and the corner pick-up game.