

## Risky business

March 19, 2011

Even after 30 years of experience in dentistry, I am still struck by the false sense of invincibility in some young people — especially when it comes to their dental health.

They believe they can take chances when it comes to properly caring for their teeth and that nothing will hurt them. I call it the invincibility of

youth. The truth, of course, is that the decisions we make always come with consequences, good or bad, and lack of attention to oral health can often lead to painful and costly medical issues (and in some cases, even death).

Recently, I was introduced to a young man (26 years old). He was wearing Army fatigues, even though he is a civilian now. My son graduated from dental school this past summer and is now an Army dentist, so I started up a conversation. I was shocked by what he told me.

This young man was suffering from multiple abscessed teeth as a result of some poor decisions that he had made since high school. When I say suffering, I mean the kind of suffering that had caused him to try to pull out his own tooth with pliers. Just a few years ago, his teeth were fine. But following some drug abuse and lack of home care, his mouth was in serious trouble. Thankfully this story has a happy ending as this young man was able to find the necessary treatment. However other young people may not be as lucky.

I was alarmed and saddened to see how devastating the consequences of bad deci-

sions can be, even after only a few years. I am reminded of Deamonte Driver — the 12-year-old Maryland boy who died in 2007 from an untreated dental infection. A simple visit to the dentist could have saved this boy's life, but the real danger of neglecting

dental disease wasn't appreciated until it was too late.

Not taking care of your teeth is

risky business. Whether it is the overuse of sports drinks or sugary sodas, prescription drug misuse, lack of oral hygiene, or playing sports without a mouth guard, the speed of dental decay and its lasting devastation can change a young person's life forever.

While young adults are home for school breaks, I encourage you to take this opportunity to visit a dentist, for it may help prevent future health problems. Maintaining good oral health takes very little effort — just don't ignore it!

Kids think that dentures are only for grandparents; in the case of the young veteran, they belong to a 26-year-old man.

*Doyle Williams, DDS, is the Chief Dental Officer of DentaQuest. Dr. Williams is a sought-after expert on oral healthcare and has made appearances on "The Today Show," Fox News as well as other outlets.*

*DentaQuest administers Maryland's dental program. They are the leading grant maker in the state for oral health and support the Maryland Dental Action Coalition and the University of Maryland Dental School.*

## Doyle Williams, DDS