Oral Health Literacy and Dental Care among Low-Income Pregnant Women

Caroline Bibula

New York City College of Technology

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**Study purpose**

The article is titled "Oral health literacy and dental care among low-income pregnant women." The authors of this article include Maybury C, Horowitz A.M, La Touche –Howard S et al. The journal's name is "*The American Journal of Health Behavior*." <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/png/ajhb/2019/00000043/00000003/art00010>. The article was published in May 2019. <https://doi.org/10.5993/AJHB.43.3.10>. The authors indicated that there was no conflict of interest.

This study focused on oral health literacy during prenatal dental care among low-income expectant mothers. The study aimed to evaluate the effect of oral health literacy (OHL) on the utilization and effectiveness of prenatal dental care. Many pregnant women experience active periodontal diseases, including gum problems or tooth decay. According to Maybury et al. (2019), research conducted around 2004-2006 in the United States indicates that 44% of pregnant women visited dental health care. However, many expectant mothers from a low-income population in Maryland need to be made aware of prenatal dental care that is readily available to them. The low-income pregnant women don’t have knowledge that poor oral care might significantly affect their general well-being or their children. Pregnant women are unaware that they can transmit bacteria to their children. Additionally, low-income pregnant women are not aware of preventive measures they should engage in to prevent dental problems. Therefore, oral health literacy is critical to pregnant mothers to enable them to practice and engage in oral health-promoting behaviors and habits to prevent oral issues in their children significantly. Therefore, researchers conducted a study between July 2016 and April 2018 to establish the rate of knowledge, understanding, and practices regarding the prevention of dental carries amongst pregnant women experiencing financial challenges in Maryland.

**Experimental design**

This study applied a mixed research methods model to conduct the study. The mixed method approach enabled researchers to assess various facilitators and barriers to prenatal dental health. The participants included 117 pregnant women and between 18-28 years. The participants were selected at self-will. The study was conducted over a long period between July 2016 and April 2018. The researchers applied measures by developing a structured interview guide and a focus group based on the interview framework. The interview questions were also enacted based on medical and dental appointments and demographic traits. The survey elements were associated with dental problems prevention from the National health interview survey. The researchers used face-face interviews and focus groups to determine the level of expectant mothers' awareness of the significance of prenatal dental care and Maryland's prenatal dental insurance program (MPDIP).

The researchers analyzed the findings statistically. For instance, selected team members and software analysis tools recorded, duplicated, and verified the interviews. Researchers used one-on-one interviews to determine the pregnant mother's barriers to accessing dental care and coordinators to care. The duplicated interviews were coded and analyzed to obtain significant themes and statements. Then the head of research and a team member discussed the themes and codes to generate a common ground.

The researchers were calibrated as they accurately analyzed data using software data analysis tools. For instance, the duplicated data was entered into Atlas. ti version 7.5 qualitative content analysis software to enable extraction of accurate themes and statement.

**Results**

The results of this study showed that the participants, 117 pregnant women in Maryland conducted, had a low level of oral health literacy. Even though Maryland Medicaid health covers prenatal dental care, only 53% of participants of expectant mothers seek dental services during the prenatal period. Most expectant mothers did not know of the Medicaid dental program for pregnant women or the significance of prenatal dental care. The research also indicates that most low-income pregnant women had financial challenges accessing a Medicaid dental provider. Significantly, the women also showed low levels of understanding regarding strategies to prevent dental diseases. The women did not also practice positive health behaviors to counter dental problems.

The researchers identified three themes from interviews and focus groups. One theme is the reasons for having a prenatal dental appointment. Thirty-five interviewed women indicated engaging in dental appointments during the prenatal period to prevent dental issues. The women believed dental care is essential to the mother’s oral health as it could affect the unborn child’s health too. The results indicated that some women had regular dental visits at all times. However, some looked for dental care because a health care worker encouraged them to visit a dentist. The second theme issues with the Medicaid dental benefit. The research participants demonstrated several issues concerning Medicaid dental benefits, as most women experienced difficulties navigating the system. The women indicated they did not know how to find a dental caregiver. This showed that many women were unaware of Maryland Healthy smiles dental program (MHSDP) Medicaid advantages for pregnant mothers.

The third theme is suggestions on how to increase prenatal care. Participants of this research highlighted several factors that might assist pregnant women in receiving dental care better. Some recommended a more sociable connection regarding MFSDP to help deal with the navigation problem. Other women also suggested using prenatal dental care awareness articles with simple terms. Several women stressed on encouraging dental service givers to welcome Medicaid insurance in underserved rural regions.

**Conclusions**

The researchers concluded that when low-income pregnant women get easy access to dental care during the prenatal period and have a chance to see a dentist, the possibility of them receiving crucial information regarding health habits to improve oral health and that of unborn kids is high. This might increase pregnant women’s oral literacy health. The authors recommend that to lower cases of ECC, the relevant authorities must enact policies and educational programs to boost oral health literacy among low-income expectant mothers as the OHL relates to their children’s oral health wellness. Therefore, pregnant mothers must have the oral health literacy necessary to establish healthy dental habits. The findings of this article support the knowledge of this prenatal dental care topic since pregnancy might lead to dental problems, such as gum diseases or tooth decay, as some pregnancy hormones affect gums and teeth. The study had a limitation in that the data collected was self-reported, which might have created favoritism from the interviewer. Another limitation was that there was a possibility that the participants were answering questions inaccurately based on what they thought the interviewer showed favorable.

**My impression**

This article is crucial as it encourages expectant mothers to seek dental care services during pregnancy. The findings of this study can be applied to the dental hygiene profession to encourage prenatal dental care and assist in managing dental issues better, such as preventing oral diseases and providing quality treatment procedures. The findings can also guide dental caregivers on the most effective strategies to offer patient and community education regarding dental care to promote home and clinical setting care and improve general individuals seeking dental services. The government, federal, and health policies should also aim to support and strengthen prenatal dental care programs and policies to enable low-income pregnant women to access quality prenatal dental care. After gaining vital insights from this article, I have one question: What is the best time to seek prenatal dental care during prenatal development?

**References**

Maybury, C., Horowitz, A. M., La Touche-Howard, S., Child, W., Battanni, K., & Qi Wang, M. (2019). Oral health literacy and dental care among low-income pregnant women. American Journal of Health Behavior, 43(3), 556-568.  <https://doi.org/10.5993/AJHB.43.3.10>