

DEN1112 Term Project: Dental Health Care in the United States

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## Dental Health Care in the United States

Dentistry is a rapidly growing occupation that takes on a variety of shapes and functions in terms of patient care. In the times that we are currently living in, where there is an immense amount of media coverage and influencers that control and are in charge of the standard of our society, there are much more societal norms that exist that make it so people feel as they can fit in. Therefore, leading to more demands in desire to obtain further dental work done. Dentistry is more than just about teeth, as it takes on the responsibility to guide the patient not only to feel healthy, but to look healthy as well.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics (2019), in 2019, there were a total of 200,419 active dentists for the population of over 300 million residents of the United States. With the huge ratio of patients to dentists of roughly 1500:1, it is unlikely some may be left untreated with even the most basic levels of dental care. There are other factors that come into play in addition to not being able to receive dental care, however, the status of dental health care that can be observed remains a sad but true reality; from economic class disparities to the lack of dental health education. The COVID-19 pandemic also played a big role in altering the world of dentistry, whether it was an influx of patients presenting for similar complaints and issues to economic or financial disparities that allowed or disallowed dental care treatment.

### **Status of Dental Health Care**

Dental health care has evolved both as a profession, but more so for the patient experience. The Frontline PBS documentary, “Dollars and Dentists”, shows a good portion of what is expected of the patient experience and what may go on behind the curtains of corporate

dental clinics. Dental care is not an easy task to perform for the dentist, but also it isn't always easy for patients to find the goldilocks dentist who will perform in the favor of the patient's true needs while remaining the most conservative.

Because of the lack of care and lack of a class of dental health professionals who are able to provide for patients in need of dental work, some states, like Minnesota, have enabled dental therapists to conduct procedures; such as, fillings and extractions, which in most cases, would be done by dentists. Some students in the class stated that they would much rather have someone who was 70% or even 50% of a dentist to care for their dental health if they were in need for it while other students were completely against the idea. Though the individual stances varied on the concept of dental therapists, I feel that dental therapists may be useful in the practical aspect, but not in a preventative aspect. I believe that the practical aspect is helpful in completing the work that needs to be done, preventative measures, such as, educating the patient and focusing on the preventative strategies may be more beneficial in the long run of patient care as a whole.

Another topic that was covered in the documentary was the way corporate dental clinics were run. Though claims by the managing personnel of these offices stated that their priorities were set on patient care, dental offices operated in various ways that prioritized maximizing profits rather than maintaining quality of patient care. An example of this would be how offices were advertising and "becoming financial advisors" to patients rather than health care providers that they should be. Populations that did not have access to financials to receive adequate dental care would rely on signing up for CareCredit or other programs that would pay the dentists, but leave the patients paying off years of debt. Though not familiar with this in situation in my country, being exposed to CareCredit is something that I've experienced first-hand at a corporate dental office chain that I previously worked for.

### **Dental Health Care and Vulnerable Populations**

Out of the entire population of those who lack proper dental care, there are specific populations; such as, children, pregnant women and older adults, that are considered vulnerable populations and may face issues because they belong to their respective demography. The vulnerable population that was represented well in the documentary, “Dollars and Dentists”, as well as, mentioned in the article, “Access to Oral Health Care: A National Crisis and Call for Reform” is that of the older adults. While, “Dental caries and periodontal disease represent increased risks for this age group, and active decay has been demonstrated to be more prevalent than in the pediatric population (Bersell, 2017),” the older adult population lack regular dental care for reasons, including, “...outdated dental health information; diminished dental perceptions; fear; lack of a relationship with a dentist; and mobility difficulties (Bersell, 2017).”

Many insurance policies that are under Medicaid and Medicare are not those that pay dentists as much money as they think they deserve for the work being done. This brings the quality of work down so that more production can take place. As mentioned previously, the older adult population in the documentary, “Dollars and Dentists”, are vulnerable due to the nature that they may not have the funds to cover necessary or recommended dental care. This led to corporate officials to initiate financial plans to receive payment, in full, for the treatment that is planned or initiated while the patient may not understand the full picture of what they are signing up for and must figure out and manage their own financials afterwards. While dental health care can often be overlooked by many, it may especially be important for maintain good oral health for older adults as poor oral health may pose additional common health issues amongst older adults; such as, diabetes (Bersell, 2017).

### **Dental Health Care and COVID-19**

With the currently ongoing health crisis, COVID-19, many things have been implemented and changed, which have exacerbated the disparities in the status of dental care in the United States. Though dental care is more accessible now than they have been during the height of the pandemic, dental health care has changed as a whole due to the pandemic. The new, quickly spreading virus was definitely something that induced stress amongst many of the already vulnerable populations. “Stress and dietary changes can alter the oral microbiome as well (Tingley, 2021)”, which meant that many people were finding themselves with different and new oral health conditions that they may not have experienced before. In the article, “The Pandemic Was Bad for Our Teeth. Will It Change Oral Health Forever?”, it referenced a survey conducted by the American Dental Association that found, “an increase in stress-related conditions among patients (Tingley, 2021).”

In addition to all the stress-related oral health issues that shot up, the older adults that were already more prone to oral health conditions than the general public, faced further threats to their oral health.

“The groups hit hardest by Covid-19 ... were already the most likely to suffer from cavities, gum disease and oral cancer, the most prevalent oral-health problems in the United States. And before the coronavirus, about a third of adults were not receiving preventive oral health care (Tingley, 2021).”

Though many were already not receiving preventative oral care procedures on a regular basis before the pandemic, “...a nonprofit research and advocacy group, found that six million adults had lost their dental insurance because of the pandemic... (Tingley, 2021).”, meaning that the

pandemic has increased the number of adults who receive preventative oral care. Loss of insurance was one of many issues that the pandemic brought about to the ability of receiving dental care. Because dental health care procedures are intimate appointments with dentists, fear of virus exposure was not an uncommon reason why patients avoided the usual dental visits, whether they had access to care or not.

### **Personal Experiences**

Previously, I worked at a corporation dental clinic chain when I had little to no interest in the field of dentistry. Reflecting back on my experiences after all that I've learned and all that I've been exposed to whilst watching the documentary and reading the articles reminded me of the experience I've had with CareCredit. At the time, working as a front desk staff, in reception, at the dental clinic, I was told that I should encourage older adults, who are unable to afford their recommended care, to sign up for the credit service. Initially, I thought that it was a very cool way to help patients pay for the procedures that they needed, but recently, I've learned how this is exploiting the vulnerable populations in order to have a more profitable business. Though I felt inadequate to sell this service to patients in need, I'm glad that I did not because I would feel extremely bad for doing it now.

At the private practice that I work at, where I work as a dental assistant, I learned many different types of dentists, who may prioritize production over quality care and dentist-patient relationships. My dentist calls Medicaid offices as Medicaid mills because you have to do so much in so little time to get enough money to get by as a dentist.

I don't think that there is a solution to all of the dental care situations that exists at this time. Even though students have expressed that increasing the amount of dental therapists may be helpful in increasing the accessibility of dental care, I still stand with the ideal that the situation can only be improved gradually through education of the significance of dental health care for future generations to value. As a future dental hygienist, I would ensure that patient care is also linked to good patient relationships with their providers. In addition, I would also want to educate the patients with whatever they may want to know more about, as well as, what I know may be beneficial for them to implement into their daily routine when it comes to oral hygiene care. Though it may not be easy to establish and maintain patient and provider relationships, it will be a process that brings more interest oral health care from within the patients themselves, therefore, spreading the awareness and bringing more patients to see the need to receive preventative oral care procedures and attend routine dental visits.

## References

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