

New Report Provides Evidence for Expanding the Dental Care Workforce

As community, tribal, state and national leaders debate how best to solve the nation's intensifying oral health care crisis, a rigorous review of more than 1,100 documents on dental care provided all over the world indicates that mid-level providers such as dental therapists could greatly expand access to care, especially for children. In addition, incorporating mid-level providers into the dental team could place new providers in underserved communities.

The report reviews the history and practice of dental therapists in 54 countries ranging from the United States to Malaysia. According to the report, dental therapists provide technically competent, safe and effective care, while also improving access to care, specifically for children. It found no evidence to indicate that the public perspective of dental therapists in any country was other than positive, according to the principal author, David Nash, DMD, MS, EdD. Nash is the William R. Willard Professor of Dental Education and Professor of Pediatric Dentistry at the College of Dentistry at the University of Kentucky, and member of the American Dental Association and of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

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THE DIRE STATE OF ORAL HEALTH CARE ACCESS IN AMERICA

Lack of access to affordable dental care is causing unnecessary pain and suffering for millions of children and adults, sending hundreds of thousands to hospital emergency rooms with preventable dental disease and even putting some of them at risk for death:

- According to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the U.S. dental care system fails one-third of all Americans – that's more than 100 million children and adults who can't get dental care when and where they need it.
- Close to 50 million Americans live in places where there aren't enough dentists to meet the need, according to data from the Health Resources and Services Administration.
- The Pew Center on the States reports that 830,590 ER visits were made across the country in 2009 for preventable dental problems.

These gaps in our oral health care system hit low-income families, communities of color, rural communities, and children the hardest. Tooth decay is the number one chronic disease for children, five times more common than asthma.

This crisis is about to get worse: In 2014, through the Affordable Care Act, more than 5 million children will become eligible for dental coverage. But just because they have coverage does not mean they will be able to get dental care. Already, 17 million children from low-income families go without seeing a dentist every year, according to a report issued by U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging.

EXPANDING THE DENTAL TEAM

The IOM and others have called for new workforce models to expand oral health care access. Numerous states are exploring an approach that would bring in a new type of mid-level dental care provider – known variously as a dental therapist, dental health aide therapist and registered or licensed dental practitioner – to work as part of the dental care team. These mid-levels focus on providing preventive and routine dental care, especially for children in communities that can't get regular care now.

Advocates in several states, including Washington, Vermont, Ohio, Kansas and New Mexico are exploring how mid-level dental providers could help increase access to care in underserved communities. Several other states are exploring demonstration programs to assess the fit of mid-level providers to state dental practices.

In the United States, mid-level dental providers practice in Alaska and Minnesota, although they have been working for many years in 54 countries, including highly developed, industrialized and developing nations.

EVIDENCE OF QUALITY AND SAFETY

A new report released by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation firmly establishes the quality, safety and effectiveness of care provided by dental therapists, also known as mid-level dental practitioners. After conducting a rigorous review of more than 1,100 documents on care provided by these practitioners around the world, the authors of the report concluded that they deliver safe, effective dental care. Specific findings include:

- The technical quality of care provided by dental therapists, within their limited scope of practice, was consistently comparable to that of dentists – and in some cases was judged superior on some specific procedures.
- Dental therapists improve access to care, especially for children.
- Dental therapists stay within their scope of practice: They do what they are trained to do and they do it well.
- Dental therapists have a strong safety record.
- Dental therapists included in the oral health workforce have the potential to decrease the cost of care, specifically for children.
- Public support for dental therapists in the places where they practice is strong. Patients' and parents' perceptions of them are positive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Nash, DMD, MS, EdD, the principal author of the report, is the William R. Willard Professor of Dental Education and Professor of Pediatric Dentistry at the College of Dentistry at the University of Kentucky. Widely regarded as an expert on pediatric oral health, he is a member of the American Dental Association and of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

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