

Scope and Specialization in Dental Care

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Oral health is an important, and often overlooked, aspect of general health. Simple oral care—regular tooth brushing, flossing, avoiding smoking, and decreasing the intake of sugary foods and drinks—and visiting a dentist for regular cleanings and dental exams can greatly reduce the chances of suffering from various oral health problems.¹ The American Dental Association (ADA) states that oral health is an essential part of healthcare due to its role in evaluating, diagnosing, preventing and/or treating oral diseases, which can affect systemic health.²

In addition to general dentistry, the National Commission on Recognition of Dental Specialties and Certifying Boards (NCRDSCB) recognizes twelve specialties, where advanced knowledge and skills greater than those taught in graduate dental education programs are taught: dental anesthesiology; dental public health; endodontics, oral and maxillofacial pathology, radiology, and surgery; oral medicine; orofacial pain; orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics; pediatric dentistry; periodontics; and prosthodontics.³

The ADA estimates that 100 million Americans do not visit a dentist on a yearly basis, despite the fact that preventative care and good oral hygiene can prevent most dental disease.⁴ The most prevalent dental problem world-wide is tooth decay (dental caries or cavities). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), almost 90% of adults have some degree of tooth decay.⁵ Other major dental problems, like gingivitis (gum disease), tooth sensitivity, and oral cancer can be alleviated or cured with early diagnosis and treatment.⁴

Adults of working-age and seniors are more likely to face financial barriers to obtaining dental care than children, perhaps in part due to the inclusion of pediatric dental care in the Affordable Care Act of 2010, and the mandatory Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment benefit of Medicaid.¹ As with any type of healthcare, having a sufficient number and distribution of providers is essential to ensuring access to care. In 2020, there were 201,117 practicing dentists in the US, or approximately 60 dentists per 100,000 population, and is expected to increase somewhat until 2040.⁶ In 2016, there were 437 dentists in Delaware, of which 352 were general/pediatric dentists, or 1 dentist to every 3,128 persons.⁷ (We should acknowledge that Delaware borders New Jersey, Maryland and Pennsylvania, and patients may seek care in the adjacent states due to proximity. An example would be patients in western Sussex County seeking care in Salisbury, Maryland.) Sussex County was the only Delaware county considered underserved (exceeding the threshold of 5,000 patients to one dentist).⁷

References

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