

Composition of Ideal Dental Team

Caroline Harrington, MS, CHES; Jeffrey Cole, DDS, MBA; Joseph Kelly, DDS

Introduction

Oral health is essential to individuals' overall health and quality of life, so it is important that dental professionals are considered in the healthcare workforce. Poor oral health can lead to tooth decay (cavities), gum disease (periodontal disease), or oral cancer. Cavities are a common condition that can occur from childhood to adulthood.¹ Individuals with oral cancers have a five-year survival rate of 61%. Stained teeth, cavities, mouth cancers, gum disease, and canker sores can develop when an individual engages in smoking.^{2,3} Smokeless tobacco causes the same conditions. Cavities can also develop from consuming foods high in sugar. The food that an individual consumes affects oral health and the condition of the mouth affects what a person can eat.⁴ Oral health is not only related to smoking and eating habits. Oral health is associated with other chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.¹ Early detection of these chronic and oral conditions is crucial to ensure an individual's quality of life remains. Unfortunately, oral health problems affect populations disproportionately. Older adults, non-Hispanic Black Americans, and Mexican Americans experience tooth decay that goes untreated more than non-Hispanic White Americans.^{5,6} Healthy People 2030 focuses on oral health with the goals to decrease oral health issues and increase access to oral care services as not all Americans have equal access to care.⁷ In 2020, sixty million Americans resided in Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (DHPSA).⁸ There are various dental professionals in the workforce and understanding the composition of the dental team can lead to better quality care and improved access to dental services.

Dental Team

General Dentists and Dental Specialists

Dentists act as the leader of the dental care team and supervise other members of the dental profession, like dental hygienists and dental assistants.⁹ Dentists include general dentists, oral and maxillofacial surgeons, orthodontists, and prosthodontists, among other specialties, and they are required to be licensed.^{10,11} Dentists diagnose and treat problems of the mouth and teeth. They examine the gums, teeth and mouth, fill cavities and refer individuals to other healthcare professionals when needed.^{11,12} Dentists also provide education about proper nutrition, smoking cessation and proper oral health behaviors.^{3, 11-13} Dentists are encouraged to educate their patients about healthy eating behaviors such as limiting sugar sweetened beverages due to the association between nutrition and oral health.¹³ Dentists are also encouraged to provide patients who smoke with resources, information and education about quitting smoking because of the affects that smoking has on oral health problems and health.³ Dentists inform patients of oral health behaviors like flossing, brushing teeth twice a day, and seeing a dentist regularly as well.^{12,13}

Dental Hygienists, Dental Assistants, and Dental Laboratory Technicians

Dental hygienists, dental assistants and dental laboratory technicians are supervised by dentists. All states require licensure for dental hygienists.^{10,14} Teeth cleanings and taking x-rays are

common responsibilities of a dental hygienist.^{12,14,15} Like dentists, dental hygienists provide oral health education, including how to floss and what toothbrushes to use.¹⁴ A dental hygienist also reviews oral health histories and can conduct oral health screenings.¹² Dental hygienists can screen for diabetes, oral cancer, and hypertension, among other conditions.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Screening for chronic diseases is important in the dental field since oral health is linked to many different conditions. Screening also allows for early detection and treatment of diseases. However, not all dental hygienists screen for such diseases. A cross-sectional survey of dental hygienists who practiced in the U.S. and Canada showed that 56% of dental hygienist state screening for diabetes is their responsibility but many do not screen due to of lack of time, education, and awareness of state rules and regulations related to screenings. Ninety-five percent did report that they provide education about the association between diabetes and oral health.¹⁶ Similar results occurred for oral cancer. A systematic review showed that dental hygienists feel that they are knowledgeable about oral cancer risks factors, like tobacco but that they lack the education to perform certain screenings, like palpation of lymph nodes.¹⁷ Overall, a survey of three thousand one hundred thirty-three dental hygienists showed that 85% of dental hygienists feel it is important to screen for conditions, especially hypertension and diabetes. Training, time, and dentist and owner support were reported to be factors that affect dental hygienists' likelihood of conducting medical screening.¹⁸

Dental assistants work directly with dentists, assisting them during procedures.^{12,19} These dental professionals may also perform x-rays and provide education after surgery.^{15,19} Scheduling patient appointments and keeping records are other tasks dental assistants perform.¹² Dental laboratory technicians work closely with dentists but do not have as much contact with patients as dental hygienists and dental assistants. Dental laboratory technicians follow dentists' instructions to create dental appliances, like dentures, crowns, veneers and bridges.^{12,15,20}

Community Dental Health Coordinators

Community dental health coordinators (CDHDs) are dental professionals that have been recently integrated into the field of dentistry.

Community dental health coordinators improve dental care as well. These professionals act as community health workers and patient navigators to connect individuals struggling to access dental care to dental services in their area.^{15,21} CDHCs were first introduced in the United States through a program that the American Dental Association piloted. The program improved oral health outcomes and access to dental care. Results reported from the pilot program showed that one hundred eighty-four children aged zero to three years old were set up with dental care by one CDHC in Virginia, and in New Jersey, HPV vaccine rates increased by 19% due to the incorporation of CDHCs. Overall, the pilot program connected six thousand patients to dental services.²²

Conclusion

Dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants, dental laboratory technicians, and community dental health coordinators account for the dental care team. These healthcare professionals improve oral health problems and impact other health conditions. CDHCs are not common among dental professionals throughout the United States.²³

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