

Editorial

“Access to Oral Care Should Be Universal and Barrier-Free,” A Seminal FDI White Paper Explains



Oral diseases continue to plague humanity. Despite breathtaking advances in health care, oral and maxillofacial afflictions are a neglected global public health challenge. Oral diseases are amongst the most common noncommunicable diseases worldwide, affecting some 3.5 billion people. Their direct cost is estimated to be almost US\$55 billion annually, whilst the indirect treatment costs due to neglected oral disease are considered to be more than US\$185 billion.

These figures are probably not widely known, as oral diseases are generally relegated to the “back burner” by many health and other major decision-making authorities. Nevertheless, the human suffering and the economic impact of oral diseases extend far and wide. Apart from causing pain, discomfort, disfigurement, tooth loss, and poor quality of life for the individual, oral diseases are well known to result in unaccountable numbers of missed school or work days as well. Hence, coping with the current universal burden of oral disease is a herculean challenge, and understanding its economic implications is critical for all decision-makers in every region of the world.

In the face of this extraordinary challenge, the FDI World Dental Federation (FDI) has now produced a comprehensive white paper that provides a contemporaneous and state-of-the-art overview of the situation as well as practical solutions for mitigating poor access to oral care. The white paper, entitled “Access to Oral Health Through Primary Health Care,” was produced by an erudite, select group of academics and policymakers¹ (<https://www.fdiworlddental.org/fdi-access-oral-health-care>). It was written to support National Dental Associations (NDAs) and policymakers in understanding the challenges in accessing oral health care and provides so-called implementable solutions to address this universal problem.

First, the document addresses both the macro- and micro-level issues pertaining to accessing, delivering, and utilising oral health care. The key takeaways in this section include the following barriers to access:

- Unequal distribution and inaccessibility to the oral health workforce
- Oral health being separately compartmentalised from the rest of the health care framework
- Inequalities due to advancing technologies, particularly in high-income countries
- Lack of governmental commitment to tackling the social and commercial determinants of health that contribute to oral diseases
- Ever-increasing cost of oral health care, which is not usually covered by the national health or health insurance services in most jurisdictions

Of these, perhaps the most telling are the latter two elements in the list, with health administrators merely paying lip service to oral care as well as the provision of threadbare funding for oral care delivery.

Finally, the paper provides the following solutions for accessing oral health care under seven different subcategories, as summarised below.

1. Human Resources

- Engaging other stakeholders in the discussion to build a cohesive primary health care team that includes oral health
- Developing strategies for oral health workforce retention in rural and deprived areas
- Developing an undergraduate/graduate curriculum incorporating interprofessional collaboration
- Provision of equitable access to oral health professions irrespective of differences in ethnicities and sociodemographic variables
- Developing an appropriately trained oral health workforce incorporating wider social settings such as primary and secondary schools
- Changing the perception of the wider health care workforce to help integrate oral health into the public health domain
- Developing a competency-based continuing professional development training for the wider health care workforce

2. Information and Research

- Supporting NDAs and universities in implementing country-level data collection

3. Service and Delivery

- Supporting NDAs to advocate for and develop national oral health strategies
- Collecting and disseminating case studies of effective vertical and horizontal integration
- Ensuring that primary health care professionals are educated to provide good oral health promotion messages and signpost to oral health services

4. Medicines and Technology

- Advocating for the availability of the World Health Organization’s Essential Medicines List
- Advocating for the implementation of teledentistry and telehealth across all levels of the profession

5. Financing

- Further research to understand the effects of different provider remuneration systems including co-payments and different mechanisms for co-payment
- Further training to develop frameworks for priority settings within oral health systems

6. Governance

- Supporting NDAs to advocate for and develop national oral health strategies

7. Advocacy

- Advocacy at all levels for improvements across all the social determinants of health
- Working with others in the global health community to determine best approaches to mitigate common risk factors

To conclude, as most countries are currently planning to implement universal health care (UHC), it is imperative that oral health is not left behind. This fully fledged white paper, a summary of which is provided here, is essential reading for all stakeholders of dentistry—from dental practitioners to administrators—and advocates of health care policy in governmental and nongovernmental organisations. Understanding the contemporary intricacies to barriers to primary health care, as clearly defined here, is the key to subsequent advocacy and implementation cascade.

Finally, it is hoped that dental health care access and delivery will be a key subject at the United Nations high-level meeting on UHC in September 2023 and that all or most of the foregoing will be incorporated, debated, and discussed at this landmark event. The white paper has arrived at a propitious time, and the profession should grasp and exploit this opportunity!

(A podcast on the “Access to Oral Health Through Primary Health Care” can be found at <https://www.fdiworlddental.org/access-oral-health-challenges-solutions-and-integration-primary-health-care>.)

org/access-oral-health-challenges-solutions-and-integration-primary-health-care.)

Conflict of interest

None disclosed.

REFERENCE

1. International Dental Federation (FDI). Access to oral health through primary health care. 2023. Available from: <https://www.fdiworlddental.org/fdi-access-oral-health-care>. Accessed 15 June 2023.

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