

Interprofessional Collaboration in Improving Oral Health for Special Populations



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KEYWORDS

- Teledentistry • Virtual dental home • Health services for persons with disabilities
- Oral health • Health status • Disabilities • Patient care management
- Interprofessional relations

KEY POINTS

- People with special needs are the most underserved and have the most significant oral health disparities of any group.
- The traditional office- and clinic-based dental care delivery system does not adequately address the oral health needs of people with special needs.
- There is increasing emphasis in US general health and oral health care systems on achieving the triple aim: better experiences receiving care, better health outcomes, and lower cost per capita.
- New delivery systems are evolving that better serve people with special needs using telehealth-connected interprofessional health care teams and creating Virtual Dental Homes.
- New delivery systems, with a focus on health outcomes, require and lead to integration of oral health services with social, educational, and general health systems.

ORAL HEALTH AND PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In proposing an expanded role for interprofessional collaborations to improve oral health for people with “special needs” it is useful to consider the definition of the phrase “people with special needs.” There are many similar terms in use in the literature. These include “people with special needs,” “children with special health care needs,” “people

Disclosure: None of the authors have any conflicts to disclose.

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Dent Clin N Am 60 (2016) 843–855
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cden.2016.05.004>

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with disabilities,” “people with complex needs,” among others.¹⁻³ Some of these terms, such as “children with special health care needs” or people with “developmental disabilities,” have definitions that are found in federal laws or regulations and are used for standardized data collection and reporting or for funding purposes.^{4,5} Other terms, such as “people with special needs,” “people with disabilities,” or “people with complex needs,” do not have generally agreed on definitions, although they are widely used and useful in describing populations who experience challenges in obtaining oral health services. For the purpose of this article the term “people with special needs” is used interchangeably with the phrases listed previously. A broad definition of this terms is people who have difficulty accessing dental treatment services because of complicated medical, physical, or psychological conditions.⁶

People with complex medical, physical, and psychological conditions are among the most underserved groups in receiving dental care and consequently have the most significant oral health disparities of any group. In the 2000 US Surgeon General’s report *Oral Health in America* it was noted that although there have been gains in oral health status for the population as a whole, they have not been evenly distributed across subpopulations.¹ That report noted that profound health disparities exist among populations including racial and ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, elderly individuals, individuals with complicated medical and social conditions and situations, low income populations, and those living in rural areas. These conclusions were reaffirmed in the 2011 report of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) *Improving Access to Oral Health Care for Vulnerable and Underserved Populations*.⁷ The IOM report noted that people with disabilities are less likely to have seen a dentist in the past year than people without disabilities; that people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to have poor oral hygiene and periodontal disease and more likely to have caries than people without intellectual disabilities; that people with special needs face systematic barriers to oral health care, such as transportation barriers (especially for those with physical disabilities) and cost; that health care professionals are not trained to work with these individuals; and that dental offices are not physically suited for them to receive care. Many other reports confirm that people with chronic medical illnesses, developmental disabilities, physical and psychosocial conditions, and the aging population in America experience more oral health care problems than others who do not have these conditions.⁸⁻¹⁵

The Population of People with Special Needs Is Increasing Dramatically

Not only do people with special needs experience greater difficulty obtaining dental care and consequent oral health disparities, but individuals with special needs are also becoming a larger part of the population. Advances in medicine have increased the likelihood that people today live longer with comorbidities that would previously have shortened their lifespan.¹⁶ Forty years ago, for example, the typical person with Down syndrome would have a life expectancy of roughly 12 years compared with 60 years now.¹⁷ Because of these advances, the number of people with special needs who need oral health services is growing dramatically. According to the 2010 US Census, roughly 50 million people, or almost 20% of the US population, have a long standing health condition or disability.¹⁸ This phenomenon is increasing as the US population ages.

Challenges in Providing Oral Health Care for People with Special Needs

There are numerous challenges in providing oral health services for people with special needs that go beyond normal considerations for other populations. These challenges often require oral health professionals to have advanced training, and personal characteristics, such as empathy, patience, and desire, to be successful.

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