

# Integrating Oral Health into the Interdisciplinary Health Sciences Curriculum



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## KEYWORDS

- Collaborative practice • Interprofessional education • Oral health
- Team-based competencies

## KEY POINTS

- The burden of oral diseases and access to care are significant health challenges for an aging society, and calls for reforms in health professions education.
- Transformation of health professions education necessitates innovative models linking interprofessional education (IPE) and collaborative practice.
- Innovations in Interprofessional Oral Health: Technology, Instruction, Practice, Service is an innovative IPE model for integrating oral health in health sciences curricula.
- The Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) is a patient-centered interdisciplinary practice model for improving oral health of older adults.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last 100 years there has been a historical movement of change in the landscape of professional health education in North America. Seminal reports, such as Flexner (1910),<sup>1</sup> Welch and Rose (1915),<sup>2</sup> Goldmark (1923),<sup>3</sup> and Gies (1926),<sup>4</sup> influenced instructional and institutional reforms in medicine, public health, nursing, and

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dentistry. These early reports generated groundbreaking shifts toward advancing scientific curricula, linking education to research, and establishing professional education in universities. In 2010, the Lancet Commission,<sup>5</sup> a global independent Commission on Education of Health Professionals for the twenty-first century, assessed educational institutions in medicine, nursing, and public health from global and systems perspectives. Despite a century of reforms, professional health education had not kept pace with global health challenges and inequities, shifts in societal demographics and burden of diseases, advances in scientific knowledge and technology, and increasing complexity of health care systems.

Oral health is a neglected global and local health issue, and the burden of oral diseases has significant consequences for individuals, populations, and health systems worldwide.<sup>6</sup> In 2012, there were approximately 810 million people aged 60 or older, and this number is projected to increase to more than 2 billion by 2050.<sup>7</sup> Given the trend in global population aging, improving oral health and general health for an aging society presents an immense challenge. More than a decade ago, the US Surgeon General described the nation's poor oral health status as a "silent epidemic" and brought widespread attention to the vast oral health inequities that persist today.<sup>8</sup> Although overall improvements in oral health have been reported, the burden of oral disease and access to oral health care remain significant for vulnerable and underserved populations, particularly older Americans.<sup>8-10</sup> Several factors contribute to poor oral health care for older adults, including inadequate education of nondental health care professionals (eg, nurses, pharmacists, physicians, and others) about oral health and diseases, and the lack of attention to oral health by health care professionals.<sup>8-10</sup> Moreover, health professionals and dental professionals have been educated separately, thus promoting the separation of oral health from general health.<sup>9,10</sup> Academic institutions need to enhance curricula to address the global challenges of oral health and local oral health care needs of an aging population.

The transformation of professional health education to strengthen the performance of health systems in meeting the needs of patients and populations is an imperative for academic institutions.<sup>5</sup> Curricular reforms are needed to effectually respond to local and global health contexts and advance health equity for individuals and populations.<sup>5</sup> The Lancet Commission provides a framework for action through its proposed set of academic reforms for the next century, including the adoption of a competency-based approach to curricula, promotion of interprofessional education (IPE), and application of advanced technologies for professional health education.<sup>5</sup>

Advancing oral health warrants bold action from educational institutions, and necessitates new models of IPE that are responsive to global and local oral health needs of an aging society. This article discusses the Bouvé College of Health Sciences (Bouvé College) at Northeastern University's response to the call to action for transforming professional health education, and describes its IPE model for strengthening the primary care health system to promote healthy aging. The Innovations in Interprofessional Oral Health: Technology, Instruction, Practice and Service (Oral Health TIPS) program at Bouvé College is an innovative IPE model that aims to prepare the next generation of health professionals with requisite team-based competencies to meet the oral and systemic health needs of vulnerable and underserved patients and populations, particularly older adults. Mechanisms for integrating oral health into interdisciplinary health sciences curricula are described. The discussion concludes with an exemplar case for aligning IPE and clinical practice to improve oral and systemic health outcomes for older adults in a patient-centered medical home.

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