

Managing Clinical Risk: Right Person, Right Care, Right Time

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KEYWORDS

- Clinical risk factors • Dental risk factors • Clinical risk
- Risk assessment • Risk management • Oral health risk
- Oral health policy

Clinical risk assessment indirectly affects access to care and so bears discussion when considering the topic of access. Practicing dentists and those in the health policy arena have renewed interest in clinical risk assessment and management. This interest lies in the potential to identify a patient's clinical needs for oral health care more specifically, to intervene early and maximize prevention, and to educate patients to become more informed consumers of oral health care. All of these actions could contribute to more efficient allocation of oral health care resources, that is, directing resources where they are most needed and producing the greatest value from them. The realization of this potential depends on the accuracy with which risk can be estimated and communicated and requires that risk assessment be applied appropriately.

To explore this potential and its ramifications for access to care, the current status of formal clinical risk assessment is described and ideas for appropriate application are discussed. It is recognized that

- Clinical risk assessment, management, and communication are essential to the practice of dentistry
- Valid and reliable risk assessment instruments are needed
- Risk assessment can contribute indirectly to expanded access to care
- Risk assessment should be applied to identifying and meeting patients' clinical needs

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- Patients' preferences and values are integral to risk assessment
- Ongoing risk communication among dentists, policy-makers, and payers is essential.

These ideas highlight the multiple ramifications of clinical risk assessment for access to care. They also are discussed within a broad definition of clinical risk.

Clinical risk refers to the chance that a patient will develop an oral health condition or that an existing oral health condition will progress. It also implies some degree of cost, whether the cost is monetary and/or an effect on the quality of life. The management of clinical risk incorporates risk assessment and also lays the groundwork for the implementation of interventions to prevent or to slow down the onset or progression of disease or to lessen the impact of the disease or its progression. It also implies some level of benefit or effectiveness, which may be monetary and/or improvement in the quality of life.

Clinical risk assessment data are generally used by dentists and policy-makers in making decisions that have an impact on patients' health outcomes. The dentist forges the most basic link between clinical risk and access to care when he/she assesses the clinical risks of a patient and then recommends treatment based on that assessment. The relationship is expanded further by the actions of health planners, policy-makers, and payers who utilize data on clinical risks to establish targeted public policies and programs, and to design benefit plans and clinical service delivery structures. These decisions may have an indirect impact on access to care. Access afforded through policy decisions is illustrated in recent policies, such as benefit plans providing more prophylaxis for patients at higher risk for certain oral health conditions, pay-for-performance programs using risk-adjusted data in measuring performance, and evidence-based clinical recommendations advising the practitioner to consider particular recommendations in the context of patient risk levels.

The potential impact of clinical risk assessment on access to specific care, on the efficient delivery of care, and on the well-being of the patient is evident. To reap the benefits of clinical risk assessment at both the clinical and policy levels, clinical risk assessment must be applied appropriately. The dental profession has the primary responsibility for evaluating data and generating information on clinical risks and must continually expand its knowledge and skills in clinical risk assessment and management. Thus, understanding clinical risk assessment and managing it appropriately begins with the dental profession.

UNDERSTANDING RISK IS ESSENTIAL TO THE PRACTICE OF DENTISTRY

Clinical risk assessment is central to dental practice. Dentists routinely gather information regarding a patient's medical and dental histories, and clinical findings are included in the patient's record. A dentist's professional judgment and ability to integrate clinical findings with knowledge of oral disease processes, range of treatment possibilities, evidence-based treatment recommendations, experience with those treatments, and the needs of the patient are all part of clinical risk assessment and contribute to the identification of appropriate treatment. When the appropriate treatment can be delivered correctly to the patient, at the correct time, risk for a disease or condition can be lessened. The benefit can be measured in terms of improved health and perhaps in terms of decreased cost as well.

Clinical risk includes three distinct functions: risk assessment, risk management, and risk communication. Risk assessment is the determination of the likelihood that an adverse outcome will occur, based on the identification and weighting of risk factors. Risk management is the action taken to mitigate adverse outcomes. Risk

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