

Dental Public Health Practice, Infrastructure, and Workforce in the United States



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KEYWORDS

- Dental public health • Access to dental care • Dental workforce
- Alternative dental providers

KEY POINTS

- Dental public health is one of the nine specialties of dentistry that are recognized by the American Dental Association.
- Dental public health focuses on prevention of oral diseases and improving oral health of vulnerable populations.
- The infrastructure comprises a wide range of federal, state, local, and private organizations that employ dental public health workforce to operationalize the mission of dental public health, that is, to improve population oral health.

INTRODUCTION

The dental profession is primarily responsible for the oral health of patients, and dental public health evolved from it to address oral health at a population level with a strong emphasis on prevention of oral diseases and ensuring provision of adequate preventive and treatment services among vulnerable groups. Dental public health is a unique discipline that is formed by a marriage of multiple broad fields that include dentistry and public health. Hence the definition, scope, and infrastructure included under dental public health are broad and varied.

DEFINITION OF DENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH

The American Dental Association (ADA) defines the vision of dentistry as “Improved health quality of life for all through optimal oral health” and its mission is to “protect

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and preserve the oral health of public.” Dental public health is an integral part of this mission and it is one of the nine specialties of dentistry. It was established and recognized by the ADA as a dental specialty in 1950.^{1,2}

Dental public health is also a field of study within the broader discipline of public health. A widely accepted traditional definition of public health is “the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting human health through organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private, communities and individuals.”³ The Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines public health as “activities that society undertakes to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy. This includes organized community efforts to prevent, identify, and counter threats to the health of the public.” IOM also identified the broad mission of public health as to “fulfill society’s interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy.”⁴

The professional certifying board in the field of dental public health, American Board of Dental Public Health (ABDPH) and its parent host organization, the American Association of Public Health Dentistry (AAPHD), have defined dental public health as “the science and art of preventing and controlling dental diseases and promoting dental health through organized community efforts. It is that form of dental practice that serves the community as a patient rather than the individual. It is concerned with the dental education of the public, with applied dental research, and with the administration of group dental care programs as well as the prevention and control of dental diseases on a community basis.”⁵

SCOPE AND PRACTICE OF DENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH

Dental public health distinguishes itself from other disciplines of dentistry in its pursuit and practice to achieve the goal of oral health. Unlike dental practitioners and all other dental specialties that focus on individual patients’ oral health, dental public health focuses on group of individuals or populations.

The conventional view of dental public health limits its scope to disease prevention (ie, fluorides, sealants, and oral health education) and mainly providing oral health care services to the most vulnerable populations. Although these are its major concerns, dental public health also has a much wider scope and practice. Reflecting on the mission of public health by the IOM, the scope and mission of dental public health is to prevent oral disease and promote oral health and general health and well-being, by ensuring the conditions in which people can achieve highest level of oral health.

The World Health Organization defines oral health as follows⁶:

Oral health is essential to general health and quality of life. It is a state of being free from mouth and facial pain, oral and throat cancer, oral infection and sores, periodontal (gum) disease, tooth decay, tooth loss, and other diseases and disorders that limit an individual’s capacity in biting, chewing, smiling, speaking, and psychosocial wellbeing.

Similarly, the World Dental Federation defines oral health as follows⁷:

Oral health is multi-faceted and includes the ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, touch, chew, swallow and convey a range of emotions through facial expressions with confidence and without pain, discomfort and disease of the craniofacial complex. Further attributes of oral health include the following:

- It is a fundamental component of health and physical and mental well-being. It exists along a continuum influenced by the values and attitudes of individuals and communities;

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