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Invited Perspective

Oral health is Essential to the Well-Being of Older People

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received May, 21 2021

Revised June, 6 2021

Accepted June, 7 2021

KEY WORDS:

Oral Health

Quality of Life

interprofessional teams

dental & non-dental health care

workers

education & training

healthcare facilities

ABSTRACT

Although the highest attainable standard of health is a fundamental human right, oral health is often not considered an important component of overall health. Older people experience poorer quality of life due to discomfort and uncleanliness of their mouth and there continue to be barriers within health systems that contribute to this poor oral health. This paper advocates for oral health to be considered part of the basic human right to good health care and discusses how stakeholders can collaborate and work together to begin to meet the needs of this population, proposing solutions and recommendations to bring about change. (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2021; ■■■:■■■-■■■)

INTRODUCTION

Good oral health is important for overall health, comfort and basic dignity of older members of society. Despite significant improvements in the oral health of populations in most developed countries, older people continue to have a disproportionate number of oral problems compared to younger people.¹⁻³ In developing countries, the poorer oral health

of older people is often exacerbated by the cumulative effect of oral conditions from a younger age and thus can have a greater impact on health later in life.⁴

What needs to be accepted is that poor oral health is more than bad gums and teeth. Pain and infection are serious consequences of poor oral health and dental problems are a reason for more hospital admissions than most people would think, with older adults identified as a key risk population.⁵⁻⁷ The interaction between oral and general health has now also been well-established, particularly in relation to

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2021.06.002>

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many chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, stroke and diabetes.^{8–14} In addition, there is a growing weight of evidence suggesting the potential role of oral bacteria in the pathogenesis of dementia^{15,16} and aspiration pneumonia in older adults.¹⁷

Although these are important concerns given the potential impact these may have on functionally-dependent and medically-vulnerable older adults, what is important to recognise is that oral health can also have a significant influence on quality of life. This has led to the FDI World Dental Federation to redefine oral health as, “multifaceted 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.”¹⁸

Many older adults, however, have dental disease reflected in poor chewing ability, xerostomia and oral pain, along with halitosis, stained teeth and oral debris which can indicate inadequate mouth cleanliness and lead to a negative body image.¹⁹ These physical discomforts can also lead to malnutrition and a weakened immune system and contribute to a reduction in Quality of Life.^{19–24} However, despite the knowledge that good oral health and a functional dentition have been linked with a better oral health related quality of life, regardless of cognitive status many older people continue to suffer.²⁵

Considering the significant impact oral health has beyond the mouth on overall health and quality of life, oral health should be considered a basic human right, especially given that conditions such as decay and gum disease are essentially preventable through daily oral hygiene practices and access to affordable primary health services.²⁶ It has been found that dental disease across the life span, even that beginning in early adulthood, can have profound effects on an individual as they age with a resultant loss of quality adjusted life expectancy, with those from lower socioeconomic groups particularly at risk.²⁷ Matsuyama et al²⁷ concluded that addressing these oral health problems early may result in improved population health and wellbeing over the life course. However, to do this effectively we need comprehensive public health strategies.²⁷

Unfortunately, the reliance on the individual to perform daily oral hygiene and find a way to access ongoing dental care are key barriers to good oral health in older people. Older people, irrespective of

whether they are from the community, a residential aged care facility (RACF) or admitted to an acute care hospital, will have some degree of premorbid poor oral health.^{13,28–32} This is often the result of a gradual decline in cognitive, sensory or physical abilities that compromise the efficacy of their oral hygiene practices.^{33–35} Poor oral hygiene in practice in turn can change the course of a previously healthy mouth. This is compounded by the fact older people are more at risk of poor oral health due to factors that are more common as we age such as polypharmacy, dehydration, reduced salivary flow, changes to diet, and poorer oral clearance due to oromotor changes.

These problems are further exacerbated by accessing dental care through the health system, older people face barriers such as eligibility for dental services, waiting lists and out-of-pocket treatment costs.³⁶ Even if there are adequate and affordable oral health services many older adults may struggle to see any type of oral health care worker due to cognitive, hearing or vision impairments making it difficult to make a dental appointment, let alone be able to get to a dental clinic because of transportation issues or a reliance on family members or carers to take them.^{37,38}

The dental profession has recognised some of the above mentioned barriers and continues to work towards adapting provision of dental care to the needs of this growing population, such as through domiciliary services.³⁹ However, access to such services is often still reliant on the resourcefulness of individuals or their carers. There is a need for a more collaborative approach between non-dental health-care workers and dental professionals. This shared responsibility for the oral health may be key to improving early recognition of dental issues and implementing preventative oral health measures. The limited use of oral health professionals in healthcare facilities, hospitals and Residential Aged Care Facilities is an ongoing issue and means that these responsibilities often fall on other healthcare workers in these settings. These health care workers may not have the expertise in preventing and managing oral health problems.

We believe that a key step to improving oral health care of older people is increasing the knowledge, skills and attitudes to oral health of non-dental health care professionals.^{40–42} All healthcare clinical staff should be able to assess an individual’s oral health. Tools have been developed to assist with screening

oral health status.^{43,44} Such tools may assist non-dental professionals to develop oral care plans and evaluate their efficacy, monitor oral health status and recognise dental problems requiring referral to a dentist and oral health therapists for further advice or treatment.^{43,44} For those with cognitive decline, the regular use of such tools may assist to identify concerns where individuals are no longer able to communicate their own needs.

In addition, there appears to be no consistent training of nurses and personal care workers in relation to techniques to clean someone's mouth or strategies to conduct oral hygiene care, in older people who may demonstrate care resistant behaviours.⁴⁵ Often such oral hygiene practices may need to be adapted where patients are at greater risk of aspiration due to swallowing deficits.⁴⁶ Healthcare facilities, when providing clinical placements, need to adopt these routines and procedures so as to provide consistency across all settings and patient cohorts. Likewise, support from oral health therapists and dental professionals as part of interprofessional teams in residential aged care facilities, geriatric rehabilitation units and an acute hospital ward have been found to be beneficial in these settings.^{30,47–51}

The stereotypical image of an older person removing their complete dentures to place in a cup beside their bed is largely becoming obsolete as there is a greater desire for older people to maintain their natural teeth. Likewise, the perception that oral health can

somehow be separated from the rest of the body, like these dentures, needs to be dispelled. Unfortunately, our healthcare systems continue to operate based on this antiquated notion much to the disadvantage of many, but particularly vulnerable older people.

There is a growing weight of evidence about how crucial oral health is not only to systemic health, but also to basic quality of life. Despite this, as a collective, our health systems continue to fail the older members of our community because we can't afford them the basic dignity to ensure their mouths are clean or free from discomfort. A paradigm shift is required to reinforce the importance of oral health as part of general health and therefore a basic human right.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JG-First draft and revisions, ML - First draft, VN - critical revisions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No funding to report.

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

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