



Coping with Shifting Landscapes in Healthcare; Incorporating Public Health into Dental Practice

Abidemi Alabi*

Dental Surgery, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria

***Corresponding Author:** Abidemi Alabi, Dental Surgery, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria.

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In order for the demands of healthcare to be met in the coming years, dentists need to rise to the challenge of the rapidly changing healthcare environment. This need arises from changes noticed over the course of the last few decades, in dental practice patterns. It has become increasingly important for dentists to learn to manage and lead intra-professional and function in inter-professional health teams, as well as effectively communicate with other professionals, patients, and communities; and essentially, being more health-oriented. There is a need to obtain knowledge and skillset to improve on the current practices and raise the standard to stay afloat in the future. Practicing dentists need to collaborate with both professional leaders and the practice community. This will serve as a platform to develop policies and agendas towards the delivery of high standards of care to individuals and the community at large [1].

Indeed, dentists should understand that there is a need to be more conscious of their patients' general health, and not limit their focus to dental treatments only. A recent study among dentists showed that the majority, who are disease-oriented dentists showed far less enthusiasm towards prevention, and satisfaction with the orthodox dental practice delivery. However, some with a health focus (health-oriented dentists) were more welcoming to the idea of getting involved in prevention and expanding the dental team's role in health promotion, hinting at a broader view of the role of the dental practice, including the patient's mental health, with the perception that patients would be happy if their dentist took an interest in their general health, which includes patient education [2].

In order to have an impact on the individual beyond the dental chair, engaging in public health is essential as well. Studies have shown that poor literacy skills affect many aspects of life, including the general health of individuals, and their children [3] and practicing dentists have as much an essential role to play in ad-

ressing the needs of underserved patients as dental educators [4]. However, barriers to expanding the role of the dentist in the general health of patients have been highlighted. These include time and financial constraints. Many stated that the current workload would not permit them to be dedicated to showing concern for the patient's general health. Lack of personal skills was also stated as a barrier, as they are not well equipped for the role. This is a major concern if dentists are to be involved in patient education and public health [2].

Generally, a good foundational knowledge of health programs and public health is important if clinicians are to be more involved in public health. This is, however, not enough, and there is a need for public health to be thought more to clinic-oriented professionals. A study among clinicians in the United States showed that respondents had a basic knowledge of public health, with gaps identified. They were, however, open to the inclusion of public health topics in continuing medical education [5].

In order for a difference to be made, and to avoid reproducing, rather than changing the existing landscape in oral health disparities, dental clinicians as health professionals, will have to rededicate efforts towards creating effective and realistic curricula aimed at improving oral health for all [4]. This is essential in order to train dental students to become better suited to incorporating public health into their future professional practice.

In an example of a step in this right direction, the faculty of Dentistry, at the University of British Columbia in 2007 formally introduced the Professionalism and Community Service Module into its dental undergraduate curriculum. This will aid proper understanding of dental public health, and enhance better clinical practice amongst the students, as they are exposed to community service-based oral health education and are taught its importance in clinical practice over the course of four years [6].

In conclusion, the World Dental Federation emphasized that through proper undergraduate dental education, a positive attitude towards dental public health could be developed amongst dental clinicians [7]. Incorporating dental public health education into the curriculum of dental undergraduates is a proper way to change the orientation of dental professionals towards the incorporation of public health into dental practice. However, incorporation into continuing medical education afterward is also an important step to consider. Also, employing other dental health professionals to engage in dental education to the population is a route to explore, especially due to the time constraint of dentists, if the current landscape in oral health disparities is to be changed.

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