My community deserves a healthy future.

Community Dental Health Coordinator: Empowering Communities through Education and Prevention

Teresa Molina, CDHC
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Action for DENTALHEALTH
ADA American Dental Association®
Tens of millions of Americans lack adequate access to dental care. Many of them suffer with untreated disease, and many more are at risk of disease, often because they don’t understand how to take care of their teeth and gums or are not getting routine preventive care.

The American Dental Association believes that education and prevention are the ultimate keys to extending good oral health to those who don’t have it. Responding to the need to dramatically increase oral health literacy and access to preventive and restorative care among underserved populations, the ADA in 2006 launched a pilot project to educate community health workers whose training focuses on oral health. These Community Dental Health Coordinators (CDHCs) work in underserved rural, urban and Native American communities, bringing more people into the oral health system.

CDHCs are typically recruited from the same types of communities in which they will serve, often the actual communities in which they grew up. This all but eliminates cultural, language and other barriers that might otherwise reduce their effectiveness. Their connections to the communities help establish trust and make them role models.

By focusing on oral health education and disease prevention, the CDHC can empower people in underserved communities to manage their own oral health. When disease requires treatment, the CDHC can link patients with dentists who can provide that treatment, and can help obtain other services — such as child care or transportation — that patients may need in order to receive care.

“We have the best oral health care delivery system in the world. But it just doesn’t reach as far as it needs to.”

— Dunn Cumby, D.D.S, CDHC site director
Flexibility in Meeting the Needs of the Underserved

The CDHC is a dental team member whose primary function is the prevention of dental disease with an emphasis on community health worker skills. While all CDHCs have basic core competencies, their job responsibilities vary depending on the goals of the clinics and communities they serve, including:

- Increasing awareness of the importance of oral health and how to become and stay healthy, through community outreach helping patients navigate the health care system.
- Providing oral health education and clinical preventive services, such as screenings, x-rays, fluoride and sealants.
- Improving health outcomes by linking at-risk patients to dentists to provide appropriate care.

The CDHC model has been adapted to numerous community settings, including clinics, private practices, schools, Head Start centers, institutional settings, churches, social service agencies and others.

“Patients are often more comfortable with me as a CDHC rather than a doctor, because they can relate to me more. Because I’m from the community.”
Can CDHCs make a difference?

CDHCs can have an enormous impact on a community.

• One CDHC provided services to 114 patients in a rural tribal community health center’s diabetes clinic. The missed appointment rate for diabetes patients dropped to zero, compared with a clinic-wide rate of 18 percent.

• Another CDHC at a Midwest Indian Health Service clinic provided services valued at more than $105,000 to 240 children at Head Start and daycare centers over a 10-month period.

• A CDHC working in a single-dentist practice in a remote, rural location nearly doubled the clinic’s productivity in 2011 over the prior year.

“I got involved in the program because I believe in its potential to increase dental health care access to the community.”

Calvin Hoops, CDHC
Esperanza Health Center
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Moving Forward

With the pilot program completed, the ADA has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of both the individual CDHCs’ effectiveness and the degree to which they are helping increase access to dental care in their communities. That evaluation has shown that CDHCs are meeting and exceeding expectations. As part of the Action for Dental Health: Dentists Making a Difference campaign, the ADA now is working to engage leaders in education and public health, as well as the private practice community in bringing CDHCs to dentally underserved communities nationwide.

“It’s rewarding at the end of each day to know I guided someone and provided hope. Guiding someone to access to care is the first thing people need to start their journey to better health.”

“The CDHC’s greatest strengths are the decrease in missed appointments; coordination of care; and management of follow-up care, prevention and education.”

— Amid I. Ismail, B.D.S., M.P.H., Dr.P.H., M.B.A., CDHC program director, dean, Temple University Kornberg School of Dentistry
CDHCs are trained to:

- Work in clinics, schools, private practices, and public health settings in accordance with state laws and regulations
- Collect information to assist dentists in triaging patients
- Address social, environmental, and health literacy issues
- Provide dental health education and help people develop goals to enhance their oral health
- Coordinate care in accordance with a dentist’s instructions
- Help patients navigate the complexities of the health care system
- Provide limited clinical services, including:
  - Screenings
  - Fluoride treatments
  - Placement of sealants
  - X-rays

The CDHC curriculum may be easily integrated into dental hygiene and dental assistant programs.

Visit ADA.org/CDHC for more information on Community Dental Health Coordinators.
Action for DENTAL HEALTH

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