

Fwd: Teledentistry Helps Improve Access to Care

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For: TCDHSCA Inland Empire



December 2017

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A graphic showing a hand holding a glowing orange sphere, surrounded by various medical icons like a heart, a microscope, a syringe, and a clipboard, all connected by lines. The background is a blurred image of a person in a white lab coat.

Teledentistry Rewires Access to Care

Give a dental hygienist an Internet connection and a portable dental unit, and the possibilities to expand access to care are endless - especially for uninsured and underserved populations. Portable and cloud-based technologies are helping teledentistry reach vulnerable populations, and providing dental hygienists an opportunity to lead community-based care. This E-Brief spotlights the effect teledentistry is having on access to care, and outlines the skills that dental hygienists need to enter the field.

Access to dental care in the United States often hinges on the ability to pay. Teledentistry provides an affordable alternative to help connect adult and pediatric populations with treatment through the virtual dental home (VDH). Under this model, dental hygienists

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bring the skilled hands of a remote, office-based treatment center to a community-based setting. Its success is reflected in a 6-year pilot program in California, where 50 VDH delivery systems were deployed over a variety of community-based settings. The results compelled a state legislator to call for \$4 million in funding to expand VDHs in California. The idea expanded to Oregon, Hawaii, and Colorado, which were convinced to try VDH pilot programs of their own.¹

Effect on Access to Care

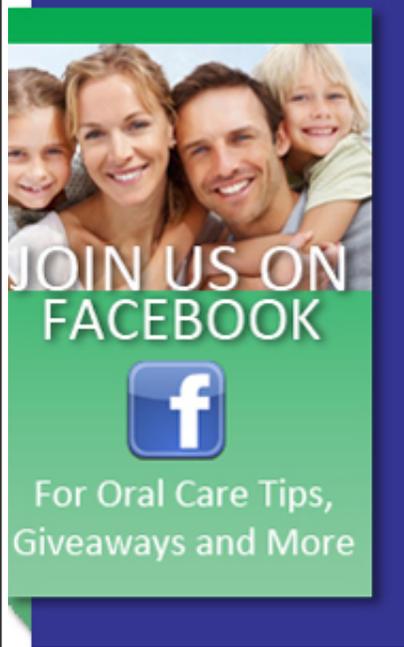
The benefits of teledentistry are straightforward. According to Gwen Essex, RDH, MS, EdD, teledentistry allows people who face obstacles in obtaining oral health care to benefit from a delivery method that provides them with regular dental care. Essex is a clinical professor in the Department of Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, School of Dentistry. She explains that within the VDH model, the dental hygienist is the primary care provider. In this role, the dental hygienist goes to community sites to see patients and obtain the information a teledentist needs to complete an oral exam and determine a treatment plan. Once the data are collected, the teledentist determines where treatment should take place.

For example, a patient who has no restorative needs, or who has caries suitable for treatment by interim therapeutic restorations (ITR) can be seen entirely in the community setting, Essex explains. A more traditional setting is recommended for patients who need additional restorative care. Those individuals subsequently return to the community setting for preventive recare appointments. "For many patients, the dental hygienist will be their sole care provider," Essex notes.

The need for expanded care stretches well outside of urban areas. Among the US' 5,000 regions designated as dental health professional shortage areas, many include rural areas.² In these less densely inhabited regions, dental care is in high demand and short supply, according to Tracye A. Moore, RDH, MS, EdD, chair of the Department of Dental Hygiene at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

Moore has researched teledentistry extensively, and recently co-authored a continuing education article that explores the advantages of teledentistry technologies.³ She also has written a chapter in the textbook, *Teledentistry and Dental Hygiene*.⁴ According to Moore, rural populations exhibit higher rates of oral disease and lower rates of oral health services utilization. Higher rates of inappropriate emergency department usage for dental complaints are also characteristic of rural populations, Moore says, in addition to experiencing poorer oral health outcomes generally than other groups.

Flexible and Mobile



Mobility is a core attribute that enables the VDH to bring care where it is needed. To make sure the teledentistry team can adapt to a variety of settings, Essex says, the dental hygienist uses an entirely mobile armamentarium that includes radiology and intraoral imaging. As dental hygienists may only be accompanied by a dental assistant, they must be able to operate and manage teledentistry technologies themselves.

To handle these situations, Moore says, a dental hygienist should have a basic knowledge of how to operate a laptop or desktop computer and a general understanding of computer software, including how to use electronic health records, encryption software, and digital radiographs. The ability to operate portable X-ray equipment, intraoral cameras, and video conferencing technology, Moore notes, is essential.

Essex cites two other tools as “must haves:” continuing education and the license required to make decisions about the radiographs patients may need. The ability to place an ITR once the patient is diagnosed by the teledentist is also a vital skill, Essex says.

Opportunities for the Digital Practitioner

Teledentistry offers a promising means to expand access to care; however, it is used mostly in public programs, whereas most dental hygiene jobs are found in private practice. This has a limiting effect on positions available under the VDH model.

“There is no incentive for private practices to adopt teledentistry,” Moore explains, “especially because telehealth practices vary from state to state with regard to private insurance and Medicaid/Medicare reimbursement.” She adds that varying laws and jurisprudence regarding licensure and scope of practice across state lines also inhibit wider adoption by private practices.

“I believe the private sector will adopt teledentistry when the dental profession realizes that advanced dental hygiene therapy, affiliated practice dental hygiene, and independent dental hygiene practice are not threats to private dental practices, but partners in the battle against lack of access to dental care,” Moore says.

While some may consider teledentistry a work in progress, the implementation and expansion of teledentistry programs in California and other states leave little doubt that the VDH model is making a positive impact.^{5,6} Where dental technologies and dental hygiene meet, growth in every direction seems the obvious path forward, and for clinicians who want a break from the structure of office-based care, the VDH is a new beginning.

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