Oral Health is Global Health

Curing the common toothache is a global health challenge more complex than finding the nearest dentist. Oral diseases are chronic diseases, with many of the same risk factors and social determinants as other chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes. But many health professionals in medicine may fail to recognize the importance of oral health, and dental insurance in the United States is not part of routine medical insurance, meaning that the poor suffer most. A 2011 Pew Trust report, for example, found that more than 16 million children in the US still lack access to basic dental care. Global poverty is closely associated with risk factors related to nutrition, water, sanitation, a healthy immune system, and tobacco use—all key factors in oral health.

Dr. Brittany Seymour, Instructor in Global and Community Health at Harvard School of Dental Medicine (HSDM), encountered these risks up close on her first mission as a volunteer dentist. During a vacation from her private practice and teachings at the University of Colorado School of Dental Medicine, she traveled to a poor community to provide dental care in rough conditions at a rural clinic, serving people who had, for the most part, never before seen a dentist. During a brief week in the field, the dental team filled cavities, performed dental surgery, provided basic oral health instructions, and distributed toothbrushes to the hundreds who lined up each day for care. When the trip was over, the team packed up their equipment to return home to their “real jobs.”

“I felt there was something wrong with this pattern,” says Seymour, “something missing, even though everyone had the best intentions.” For instance, she noted, there was no follow up; no long-term oral health care for the community, and no linkage with other aspects of medical care. In response, Seymour created a partnership between UCSDM and the University’s Center for Global Health, and subsequently developed and implemented a global health program for dental students. Ultimately, she decided to pursue a full-time career in global oral health, obtaining her MPH at Harvard School of Public Health, with a concentration in global health and population. In addition to teaching courses in global oral health, Dr. Seymour leads oral health projects in Africa and South America, and participates in government led diplomatic exchanges in various regions around the world. But the challenges—and opportunities—remain.

“Medicaid for instance,” she says. “I tried for 6 months to accept Medicaid for my patients, but in the end the administrative red tape was
prohibitive. I have a passionate commitment to health equity. If someone like me couldn’t make it work, we can understand why it doesn’t happen. The law needs to be a driver in addressing such social determinants of health.”

Licensed dental therapists are one new option in the United States for those who can’t afford (or can’t find) a dentist, but only in Minnesota—where they practice under a dentist’s supervision, comparable to nurse practitioners—and Alaska--where there are no dentists, and they can serve only in rural tribal areas. Carefully trained to provide services such as fillings, pulling teeth, and other basic care, this new profession faces strong resistance from professional dental organizations, who fear they will undercut a profession that is already regarded by many as one of medicine’s stepchildren. Dental therapists are, however, successfully practicing in 42 other nations around the world.

Professional integration, not isolationism, offers the best hope for improving oral health, argues Seymour. “We need to change belief and the culture around how we provide our services,” she says. “Rather than only focusing on curing oral diseases, let’s also cure problems of nutrition, water, and so forth, and see how much oral health improves.”

The World Health Organization (WHO), working toward this goal, recently made oral health a stated priority. Its Global Oral Health Programme (ORH), one of the technical programs within the Department of Chronic Diseases and Health Promotion (CHP), is targeting global policies and prevention strategies that can promote continuous improvement of oral health in the 21st century.

For more information:


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