

Social impact of oral disease and the role of the social worker

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Objective: The social impact of oral disease in children and adolescents is substantial. There are many ecological, behavioral, dietary and host factors associated with formation, progress and/or inhibition of dental caries. Oral health promotion that targets the ecological factors are essential and should be emphasized in any efforts aimed at achieving desired oral health outcomes. Social workers involved with children and adolescents may be well suited to promote oral health with their clients. Methods: MSW students (165; 84.1% response) and faculty field instructors (97; 48.5% response) at Boston University School of Social Work were surveyed on their oral health knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. Results: Over 80% of both the MSW students and field-based practicing faculty believed that they should be involved in oral health promotion with their clients. Although 29% percent of students and 30% of faculty identified children and adolescents as the populations most affected by poor oral health, and 31% of the students and more than half of the field instructors rated their clients oral health as “fair” or “poor”, 50% of the students and 67% of the faculty have been unable to easily locate oral health services for their clients. Conclusion: Although social workers recognize the social impact of poor oral health in children and adolescents, they do not appear to be well-informed enough to effectively promote or access oral health services for their clients. Educational opportunities exist for social workers and oral health professionals to effectively join forces and should be delved into further.

Learning Objectives:

At the conclusion of this session, attendees will be able to:

- Recognize and articulate opportunities for social workers and oral health professionals to effectively collaborate and promote oral health among populations with significant social needs.
- Describe the barriers faced by social workers and oral health professionals in efforts to effectively collaborate.
- Describe the attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of the social workers surveyed with regard to oral health promotion.

Keywords: Oral Health, Social Work

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