

Oral health promotion: Where does social work stand?

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Objective: Oral health disparities continue to exist among vulnerable populations. Heightened awareness and involvement in oral health promotion by social workers could help increase access to care and better oral health outcomes for clients. Unfortunately, no recent examples of interdisciplinary collaboration exist between social work and dental health and little is known about the topic. This exploratory study by Boston University Schools of Social Work and Dental Medicine aimed to assess knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and experiences of social workers regarding oral/dental health promotion. Methods: All MSW students were surveyed in spring 2002 (165, 84.1% response). Additionally, all faculty field instructors were surveyed (97.48.5% response). Results: Over 80% of students and field faculty agree that they should be involved in oral health promotion with clients, with 45% of students and 47% of faculty rating oral health as "very relevant" to social work. However, over 90% reported that oral health had never been addressed in their professional education. Only 38% of faculty and 28% of students felt it was easy to recognize signs of oral/dental pain in clients. More than half of both groups had been unable to locate dental care for clients. Conclusion: While social workers recognize the importance of oral health, they do not appear knowledgeable enough to successfully engage in oral health promotion at this time. Education and support for collaboration are needed.

Learning Objectives:

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

- Describe the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and experiences of several distinct groups of social workers regarding issues of oral and dental health promotion;
- Articulate barriers and opportunities for collaboration between social workers and dental health professionals; and
- Identify and describe specific actions to increase involvement of social workers in collaborative oral health promotion.

Keywords: Oral Health, Health Disparities

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I have a significant financial interest/arrangement or affiliation with any organization/institution whose products or services are being discussed in this session.

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