PAs are Contributing to Oral Health in Older Adults

Anthony A. Miller, M.Ed., PA-C
Distinguished Professor & Director
Division of Physician Assistant Studies
Shenandoah University
Winchester, VA
Why PAs?

• Provide Primary Care and Practice in Nearly Every Medical Specialty
• PAs Value Interprofessional Practice
• High Patient Satisfaction and Trust
• PAs Focus on Prevention and Health Promotion
• Increasing role in health care leadership roles & change agents
• Specific Focus on Oral Health
  • Screening and Risk Assessment
  • Understand oral - systemic connection
  • Educating Patients on Self Assessment and Good Habits
  • Applying Fluoride Varnish
  • Referrals for Dental Care
PA Impact on Health Care

Over 131,000 Certified PAs

Licensed to Practice and Prescribe in all 50 States and DC

PAs TREAT 8.5 MILLION PATIENTS/WEEK

THAT’S 449 MILLION PATIENT VISITS/YEAR
The PA Profession Commitment
Leveraging Collective Impact

- Education - oral health integrated in all PA programs
- Smiles for Life - endorsers
- Programs and Research Support - nccPA Health Foundation & PA Foundation
- Research & Publication: JAAPA & JPAE
- Certification - examination content & quality improvement initiatives for recertification
- Continuing Education
Growth of Oral Health Education and Training in PA Programs

2008: 32.8% of responding PA programs provided oral health instruction*

2014: 78.4% of responding PA programs provided oral health instruction*

2017: 96% of responding PA programs provided oral health instruction*

Efforts to integrate oral health into PA curriculum are working, and educating a new generation of providers to view oral health as integral to overall health.

*Response % for each year represents different surveys.
2016 Research

PAs who received education in oral health and disease were ~ 2.79 times more likely (95% CI=1.39-5.59, \( P=0.0038 \)) to provide oral health services in their clinical practice, compared to those who did not receive any education in oral health competencies.
“Every day, millions of people with chronic diseases struggle to manage their symptoms. About 80% of older adults have at least one chronic disease, and 68% have at least two. Chronic diseases place a significant burden on individuals as well as health care systems.

National Council on Aging, 2019
FIGURE 7
The Likelihood of Having a Disability Increases With Age

Age-Specific Estimates of Poor Physical, Sensory, and Cognitive Capacity, Adults Ages 65 and Older (%), 2015

Source: National Health and Aging Trends Study.
Data Imperatives

- Nearly 19% of adults age 65 and over have complete tooth loss
- Oral and pharyngeal cancers are often diagnosed late
- Nearly 63 million Americans live in dental health profession shortage areas
- Significant decreased dental visits based on race, disability, poverty, geographic region and population density
- Dental caries and periodontal disease are among the most common chronic conditions
- Dental conditions such as caries and tooth loss impact nutrition, self-esteem, general health
PAs Understand the Connection of Oral Health and Disease

• Oral and pharyngeal cancer
• Diabetes & link to periodontal disease
• Poor oral health link to cardiovascular disease including endocarditis and stroke
• Impact of common medications
• Poor oral hygiene - poor outcomes in aspiration pneumonia
• Mental health impact on oral health and vice versa
• Link of poor oral hygiene and use of tobacco products to poor health outcomes
Oral - Systemic Connection

- Poorly Controlled Diabetes
- Increased risk of gingivitis & periodontitis
- Oral fungal disease
- Decreased salivation
- Increased oral health complications & inflammation
- Diabetic neuropathy: altered taste, smell, dry & burning mouth
Recommended Goals

• Interprofessional healthcare teams should work together on behalf of older adults to improve quality of life and self-image by:
  • Advocating for public policies that improve oral health access and funding.
  • Assessing and effectively treating oral health conditions that impact overall health and well-being.
  • Educating patients on health promotion and disease prevention.
Conclusions

• PAs working in team-based practices are impacting oral health and its sequelae for older adults
• Patient trust and confidence in PAs positions them to have positive impact on preventive care outcomes for older adults
• PAs continue to develop referral networks with dentists and other dental care providers
• Positive oral health initiatives can reduce morbidity and mortality for diseases and conditions not directly associated with the oral cavity
• Health care financing is shifting from fee for service to outcomes and quality focus
• PAs have demonstrated they are able to rapidly respond to new markets and research
Resources

- American Academy of Physician Assistants (www.aapa.org)
- NCCPA Health Foundation (www.nccpahealthfoundation.net)
- National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (www.nccpa.net)
- Physician Assistant Education Association (www.paeaonline.org)
- Smiles for Life: A national oral health curriculum (www.smilesforlifeoralhealth.org)