



Short Communication

Oral health disparities in the time of COVID-19: An indication for focus on public health care strengthening and preventive care

Sukhvinder Singh Oberoi^{1,*}, Shibani Grover², Shabina Sachdeva³

¹Dept. of Public Health Dentistry, ESI Dental College, Rohini, New Delhi, India

²Dept. of Conservative Dentistry and Endodontics, ESI dental college, Rohini, New Delhi, India

³Dept. of Prosthodontics, Faculty of Dentistry, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi, India



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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 has impacted the health service delivery especially, the public health care system which is already overburdened. The dental health care carries the huge risk of infection due to the generation of the aerosols, through high-speed airtor. This has led to a big toll on the delivery of the dental services at global level. Even when the oral health care services are getting opened, there is still lot of dilemmas in the mind of oral health professionals in provision of the services. This crisis has given us a chance for addressing the issues of relevance affecting the oral health care services and failures of the health care system. It is time to rethink our priorities and strengthen the over-all integrity of the health care system. These calls for higher focus upon the oral care prevention strategies can be amalgamated as part of the public health care system along with strengthening of public health care.

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The COVID-19 has impacted the health service delivery especially, the public health care system which is already overburdened. The dental health care carries the huge risk of infection due to the generation of the aerosols, through high-speed airtor. This has led to a big toll on the delivery of the dental services at global level. Also, the access to the emergency oral health services has been largely affected. This has led many people with severe dental pain and acutely severe oral infections to resort to the self-medication or unscientific local therapies, without use of even the local analgesia.¹

The current pandemic has brought to the forefront the issues of the triage policies, deficiency of the personal protective equipment (PPE), and the demanding challenge of burn-out among health care providers. These issues had

been more severe as the dental care was considered to be “non-essential” as per many “stay at home orders” issued by the local and central authorities. The near shut down of all but emergency dental services in the beginning 4-6 weeks of the pandemic did not understand how dentists could be utilized as a part of the primary health care delivery. This led to the exacerbation of the oral health disparities especially those at the extreme level risk. Now when the dental services provision is getting restored, the relevance of the preventive dental care is coming to the forefront.²

Even when the oral health care services are getting opened, there is still lot of dilemmas in the mind of oral health professionals in provision of the services.³ This crisis has given us a chance for addressing the issues of relevance affecting the oral health services and failures of the health care system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to more severe socio-economic and cultural disparities⁴ and consequently lead to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: drsukhvinder@gmail.com (S. S. Oberoi).

even more disparities when oral health is concerned.⁵ The suffering of people to have access to oral health care which impacts their nutrition due to the ability to digest food and ultimately affecting their immunity and ability to fight the infectious disease such as the COVID-19. This affects the health profile of the community and also their quality of life.

This is the time we focus upon our health care system and its deficiency in delivering the preventive care with focus only upon the therapeutic care. The provision of the most basic form of preventive care in the form of emphasis on the basic oral hygiene measures in the form of good toothbrushing in habit can have long standing impact in avoiding the over-burdening of the health care system. Its time to rethink where the public health care system stands and how it can be reformed to emphasize the necessary care for the needy population.

The importance of oral health to overall health and the ethically challenging responsibility of the dental personnel for providing service to the patient and community as a whole emphasize the need for inclusion of the dentistry in the planning, as a part of the response team and effectively dealing with the public health emergency. Our oral health care delivery systems has to refocus more upon the oral health needs of the native population and higher priority has to be set upon the rural, underprivileged, needy groups, such as those with many morbidities.

With COVID-19 cases again on rise and exposing the weakness of the organizational structure of our health care system whereas tertiary treatment is the focus of care. It is time to rethink our priorities and strengthen the overall integrity of the health care system. This calls for higher focus upon the oral care prevention strategies can be amalgamated as part of the public health care system along with strengthening of public health care.

Conflicts of Interest

All contributing authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Author biography

Sukhvinder Singh Oberoi, Associate Professor

Shibani Grover, Dean and Director and Professor

Shabina Sachdeva, Professor

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