

Dental and Dental Hygiene Students' Attitudes towards Social History Questions: A Survey

Background: In 2000, the first ever US Surgeon General Report on Oral Health described the tremendous oral health inequities in the U.S. The 2021 NIDCR report on oral health reiterated that certain population groups still have significantly poorer oral health and more problems with accessing oral healthcare services than other groups. The objectives of this study are to assess how dental and dental hygiene students consider the relevance of gathering social history information. Specifically, it was assessed how important they considered to collect information about (a) lifestyle related risk factors for poor oral health, (b) general health-related information, (c) mental health/stress related factors, (d) living situation / social support factors, (e) socio-economic status, (f) safety/security questions, and (g) health literacy/ESL questions.

Methods: Data were collected with an anonymous web-based survey from 107 first year dental students and 23 first year dental hygiene students. Importance ratings were assessed with 3-point rating scales ranging from 1 = not at all to 3 = very important.

Results: Lifestyle related risk factors for poor oral health such as tobacco use (Mean=2.93), diet (Mean=2.89), and drug use (Mean=2.89) were rated as most important. General health-related information such as medication accessibility (Mean=2.81), healthcare access (Mean=2.80) and last medical visit (Mean=2.78) were also rated as quite important. Mental health, such as PTSD (Mean=2.60) and stress related factors (Mean=2.55) as well as questions about the living situation (food security: Mean=2.60; safety of the living situation: Mean=2.54) were seen as relatively important. However, questions related to the patients' socio-economic status such as their income (Mean=1.83) and education (Mean=1.89) as well as social support related questions such as marital/partnership status (Mean=1.80) were the lowest rated items. Health literacy (mean=2.65) and English literacy (Mean=2.61) also received medium level importance ratings.

Lessons Learned

Incoming dental and dental hygiene students evaluate the importance of having information about patients' risk factors for poor oral health and health-related issues highest and sociodemographic and social issues as lowest.

Future Application and Next Steps

The next step is to collect this information from 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students to be able to assess if the degree of patient contact and clinical education will increase students' awareness concerning the importance of knowing social history information to provide optimal treatment.