

The role of dental practitioners in managing medically complex patients

Oral health plays an important role in the comprehensive care of medically complex patients. These individuals, who often have multiple acute and chronic medical conditions or special health care needs, require a tailored approach to dental treatment. This editorial explores the multifaceted responsibilities of dental practitioners in managing such patients and emphasizes the significance of dental care within the broader context of their overall health.

Medically complex patients may present with conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, and more. These health issues can both affect and be affected by oral health. For example, diabetes increases the risk of periodontal disease, while poor oral health can exacerbate cardiovascular conditions. The prevalence of patients with multiple comorbidities has risen in recent decades due to factors such as sedentary lifestyles, poor dietary habits, smoking, increased life expectancy, obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, Alzheimer disease, various cancers, sleep apnea, and kidney disease.

Additionally, today's older adults are living longer than ever before. In the next 15 years, the population of Americans aged 65 and older is expected to reach 78.3 million, with an average life expectancy of 83.9 years. Many of these older adults are managing at least one chronic health condition, including heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, and obesity. Advancements in health care have also extended the lifespan of individuals with complex medical conditions and developmental disabilities. For instance, the average lifespan of a person with an intellectual disability has increased from 19 years in the 1930s to 66 years in the 1990s, with continued improvements.

Managing the dental care of patients with multiple severe medical conditions can be challenging due to potential systemic and oral complications. Understanding these challenges is essential for providing effective dental care and preventing medical emergencies, such as heart attacks, diabetic comas, respiratory arrest, or strokes. Implementing a patient-centered approach that addresses individual's specific needs is critical. Recognizing that we treat real people—complete with their

feelings, anxieties, aspirations, and emotions—is key to delivering high-quality, satisfactory care.

The first step in treating medically complex patients is a thorough assessment of their overall and oral health. Dental practitioners must review the patient's medical history, current medications, and previous dental treatments, including any complications from prior interventions. This holistic view allows clinicians to identify potential risks, such as adverse medication interactions or bleeding complications, and tailor their treatment plans accordingly, often in consultation with the patient's primary care physician or specialists.

Preventive care is particularly important in managing the oral health of medically complex patients. Regular cleanings, along with fluoride treatments and dental sealants, can help prevent caries and periodontal disease, which are especially detrimental to patients with underlying health conditions. Additionally, educating patients about the importance of oral hygiene and its impact on overall health is a crucial responsibility of dental practitioners.

The dental practitioner must carefully consider the patient's overall health status when planning treatment for medically complex patients. Decisions about whether to proceed with treatment, modify it, or explore alternative options require thoughtful deliberation. Below are examples of some common conditions that require special attention during dental treatment:

- Patients undergoing radiation treatment in the head and neck area or taking bisphosphonates for osteoporosis are at risk for jawbone complications, such as fractures, osteonecrosis, and delayed healing after extractions. In these cases, creative approaches, such as retaining roots and performing root canal treatments instead of extractions, may be necessary.
- Patients on anticoagulants require careful management to minimize bleeding risks during extractions or surgeries.
- Patients immunocompromised due to autoimmune diseases or specific therapies may require antibiotics to prevent infections. However, overprescribing antibiotics can lead to drug resistance or allergic reactions, which should be carefully managed.

- Patients with reduced salivary flow due to medications or post-cancer treatment often suffer from rampant decay and tooth loss.
- Older adults may have slowed metabolism, affecting the elimination of medications from their system. Preventing overdosing and reducing the risk of falls when prescribing controlled substances is essential.

Dental emergencies in medically complex patients can be particularly challenging, especially when their complete medical history and nuances are not readily available. Acute issues like infections or abscesses require not only immediate dental intervention but also careful consideration of the patient's broader medical condition. It is a common misconception that antibiotics alone can treat odontogenic infections. Quick and effective management of these emergencies, often in collaboration with other health care professionals for risk stratification, is essential to prevent complications.

In conclusion, the role of dental practitioners in treating medically complex patients extends far beyond oral health. It requires a deep understanding of the interplay between various medical conditions and oral care, meticulous treatment planning, coordination with other health care professionals, and a compassionate, patient-centered approach. As key members of the interprofessional health care team, dental practitioners bear significant responsibility for ensuring the holistic wellbeing of these patients. Therefore, it is crucial that dental practitioners are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide appropriate care for this population.

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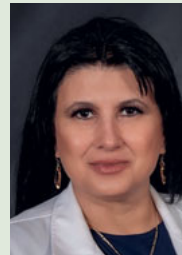
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