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Dental care as part of universal health coverage

Health is a physical and mental state fairly free of discomfort and pain, which permits the person concerned to function as effectively and as long as possible in the environment where chance or choice has placed him.¹ By this, Dubos¹ meant both the physical and social environment. This functional definition was applied to dental health and interpreted in a World Health Organization (WHO) workshop in Oslo, 1982: "The retention throughout life of a functional, esthetic, natural dentition of not less than 20 teeth and not requiring recourse to a prosthesis"².

"In addition an acceptable level of oral health would include:

- satisfactory prosthetic replacement for any missing unit which obviously detracts from esthetics
- freedom from pain
- freedom from unacceptable deposits
- freedom from unacceptable intrinsic anomalies
- an occlusion which is functionally and cosmetically acceptable."²

This is a reasonable, measurable, functionally acceptable goal. We have known for many years what is needed and what we want to achieve, but we are not there yet. A fresh point of view, maybe even a fresh strategy, is needed.

In the recent years, there has been renewed discussion of Universal Health Coverage (UHC).³ This is not a new idea. While earlier it was alluded to, now it is recommended by many. Mathur et al³ state bluntly that "It is of paramount importance that the oral health community ensures that oral diseases are included in the emerging

UHC debate and policy formulation." This is very much in lieu with the new definition of oral health that defines oral health as "a fundamental component of health."⁴

In a recent commentary in *The Lancet*, it is "proposed efforts to integrate oral health into UHC focus on three areas. First, integrated essential oral health services and the basic package of oral care."⁵ In these authors' opinion "WHO's 13th Global Programme of Work 2019–2023 with its focus on UHC can help move the global oral health agenda forward."⁵

In Israel, where I have served as Chief Dental Officer for many years, there has been UHC since 1995, mainly for general health care, but with a meager dental component. Since the 2010 reform, dental care for children was added. The entitlement age for dental care has gone up, and will include those up to 18 years of age on 1 January 2019. Preventive treatments are completely free of charge, while restorative care bears a small co-payment. On the same date, further age groups will be included in the UHC: senior citizens from 75 years of age will be entitled to preventive services free of charge and restorative care with a small co-payment. Six months later, 80-year-olds will be entitled to prosthetic treatment with co-payment. The basket of services includes two implants in the mandible if necessary for retention of the denture and up to three abutment crowns for removable partial denture support and retention.

My feeling is that oral health care in Israel has embarked on the right track, implementing the strategy promoted by the WHO, World Dental Federation, and International Association of Dental Research.



We still have a way to go, but if this can happen in many more countries, we might witness a true integration of dental health and general health.

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