

Declaring War on Dental Disease

Community Dental Health Coordinators on the Front Line

Declaring war on dental disease is necessary to reverse the trend in utilization of Emergency Department (ED) visits for treatment of dental emergencies that are more cost effectively treated elsewhere. The best way to decrease ED utilization for dental problems is to reduce the disease burden in the population that chooses to access care there. A person seeks dental care in an emergency room for many well documented reasons. A strategy to provide education, prevention and navigation services is a necessary component to have in place to address this problem.

Recognizing that most dental disease is preventable and that financial resources available to address access to dental care are limited; the American Dental Association (ADA) developed the Community Dental Health Coordinator (CDHC) based on medicine's Community Health Worker (CHW) model. Community Health Workers are more cost-effective than using physicians and/or nurses for community outreach, preventive services, and triage. Likewise, the CDHC is a more cost-effective solution than using dentists or hygienists for those purposes. Like the CHWs, CDHCs will be culturally competent and trusted in their respective communities, because they would come from the communities in which they serve. The CDHC is a new member of the dental team who fills an important role whether working with a health center or private practice.

The CDHC can perform clinical preventive services and community-based outreach duties. In addition to oral health promotion and disease prevention, they interact directly with populations who are at risk for dental disease, but are unsure of how to access a dental program. For many families, knowing which dental services are needed, how to schedule appointments and having the necessary transportation to get there is critical. The CDHC is able to help with those issues.

In addition, the CDHC can manage behaviors that frequently accompany dental treatment, such as fear and anxiety. By carefully explaining how dental disease starts and the various dental ways to prevent and treat it, parents gain understanding of their important role in safeguarding their child's oral health.

So while a CDHC may perform certain preventive services under the supervision of a dentist, such as sealants and topical fluoride applications, one of their most important roles is helping patients navigate the healthcare system. CDHCs encourage regular oral health services for special populations such as pregnant women, teething infants, diabetics and the elderly. Optimal oral health throughout the life span helps build healthy populations!

The curriculum for this program may be offered in person or online. The course work takes about a year with a brief internship to allow the CDHC to put what they have learned into practice. Scholarships may be available for students who need financial support to complete this program. Acceptance of local students who will work with in their communities to improve the oral health of their families and friends is encouraged.

The Virginia Dental Association has approved the development of the Community Dental Health Coordinator and is laying the ground work to establish a plan to launch this new cost effective member of the dental team.

VDA Proposal: Community Dental Health Coordinator (CDHC)

“War on Dental Disease – Community Dental Health Coordinators on the Front Line”

The primary purpose of Virginia’s Joint Commission on Healthcare Study for 2014 was to take an in-depth look at ways to more proactively divert patients from ERs to dental resources within their communities. But, the study was also to *"include discussion on alternative settings where additional providers can practice to provide access to additional patient populations that are not being reached."*

This Virginia Dental Association proposal was created to address access to care in alternative settings and to reduce dental-related hospital ER visits. Dental diseases, including oral cancers, are preventable diseases through education and application of well-proven prevention services. The Community Dental Health Coordinator (CDHC), based on the Community Health Worker (CHW) model, is a formally trained provider, often recruited from where they live, and leverages existing resources for workforce training and development.