



# Oral Health: Dental, Medical, & Nursing Contributions to Improving Oral Health Among Vulnerable Populations

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## Background

Dental caries is a leading chronic disease of childhood (Center for Disease Control, 2000). Oral health is indicative of general health however, access to dental health care is more constrained than primary care. There are nine times more nurse practitioners and physician assistants entering primary care than physicians and dentists (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008). Educating medical and graduate nursing students on oral health promotion and prevention will expand the number of future inter-professional health care providers having competencies in oral health assessment and knowledge of the implications of oral disease on overall general health.

## Methods

*Research Design:* Pretest-posttest

*Sample & Setting:*

First year medical (n = 3) and graduate nursing (n = 3) students voluntarily enrolled in an inaugural Oral Health Community Health Clerkship (CHC).

*Data Collection:*

Researcher developed pretest-posttest survey to assess oral health and inter-professional knowledge and attitudes. The identical instrument was used at both points in time and consisted of 14 multiple choice questions, 3 fill-in-the-blank questions, and 4 demographic questions.

*Procedures:* The pretest was administered to all 6 participants on the first day of the CHC.

Students then participated in assigned activities throughout the next 13 days, which focused on providing oral health to vulnerable populations (school-aged children and special needs patients). The posttest was administered on the last day of the CHC.

## Results

*Demographic Data:*

Age: Mean = 24.1, Range 22-27 years

Gender: Women = 5, Men = 1

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian = 5: Asian/Hispanic = 1

*Oral Health Knowledge:* Mean +37% change from pretest to posttest

*Oral Health Attitudes:* A 16% + attitude change in acknowledging that a variety of professionals are responsible for oral health care and that oral health care is as important in acute care as in primary care settings.

*Qualitative oral health knowledge:* A mean + 77% improvement in ability to supply information to open-ended items.

Themes : Poor access, Need for flexibility, Need for more training in caring for special needs patients, Importance of dietary habits and oral health.

## Discussion

Educating medical and graduate nursing students early in their education on the importance of oral health and its relationship to general health resulted in positive outcomes in both knowledge and attitudes. Further evaluation later in their education is necessary to determine retention of knowledge and attitudes.