

Vision 2020 Think Tank

A new definition for oral health

Objectives and rationale

Oral conditions rank among the most prevalent non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and affect almost 4 billion people worldwide. They share common risk factors with many NCDs and are affected by similar social determinants. Oral health is an important contributor to overall health and well-being, and thus needs to be properly defined, assessed, managed and promoted. However, an understanding of what is meant by, and the implications of oral health may differ among different stakeholders.

When drafting this position statement, the FDI Think Tank reviewed existing definitions of oral health, which for the most part relied on a biomedical perspective, but failed to account for patients' values, perceptions and expectations. The present definition is an attempt to propose a universally applicable and acceptable definition of oral health in order to more clearly position oral health within health; demonstrate that oral health does not occur in isolation, but is an important part of overall health and well-being; raise awareness of the different dimensions of oral health as a dynamic construct; and to empower patients by acknowledging how individual's values, perceptions and expectations impact oral health. Importantly, this definition lays the foundation for the future development of standardized assessment and measurement tools.

Definition

Oral health is multi-faceted and includes the ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, touch, chew, swallow and convey a range of emotions through facial expressions with confidence and without pain, discomfort and disease of the craniofacial complex.

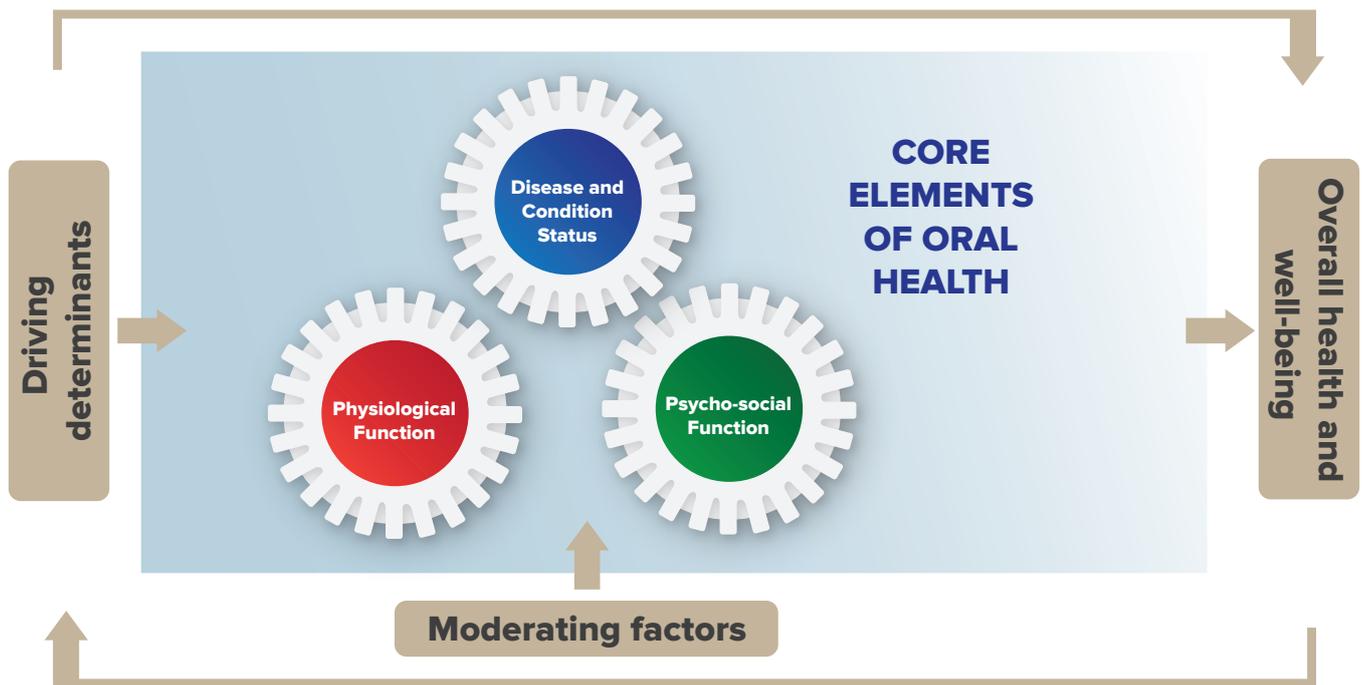
Further attributes related to the definition state that oral health:

- **is a fundamental component of health and physical and mental well-being. It exists along a continuum influenced by the values and attitudes of individuals and communities;**
- **reflects the physiological, social and psychological attributes that are essential to the quality of life;**
- **is influenced by the individual's changing experiences, perceptions, expectations and ability to adapt to circumstances.**

Framework

Alongside the proposed concise definition, a companion framework was developed to describe the complex web of interactions between the three core elements of oral health (disease and condition status; physiological function and psycho-social function), a range of driving determinants (elements which affect oral health), moderating factors (factors which determine or affect how an individual scores their oral health) and, finally, overall health and well-being, as follows:

Framework for the Oral Health Definition



Although different stakeholders may value the importance of the various elements that influence oral health differently, the proposed definition and framework are meant to be universally applicable in all geographical areas, for all populations, and by different stakeholders. They are meant to serve as enablers:

- **For individuals**, who are encouraged to value their oral health and given an active role in evaluating it and assessing their needs, leading to greater empowerment;
- **For oral health practitioners**, who are presented with a unique opportunity to work in a more patient-focused way while joining the wider health community in acting on driving determinants, rather than solely treating existing disease;
- **For other health professionals**, who are offered the opportunity to better understand oral health, its importance, and its rightful place in any and all health conversations, and thus, policies related to health;
- **For National Dental Associations** who now have a globally agreed upon definition that can be used to set priorities according to their own need and priorities, and who in the future, will have access to an accompanying measurement toolbox for use to assess individuals and population needs, and to be used as an advocacy tool for national policymakers;

- **For FDI** who can drive this initiative further by providing standardized instruments to collect and collate standardized data, which will be fundamental in informing policies and priorities at the global level and serve as a powerful advocacy tool. It complements the work undertaken by FDI in the second edition of the Oral Health Atlas, “The Challenge of Oral Disease – A call for global action”, since this definition and what flows from it will provide the tools to implement the call for global action that is spelt spelled out in the book.

Process

In a preliminary phase, definitions of overall health and oral health were identified through a literature search and through dialogue with National Dental Associations (NDAs) members of FDI. Subsequently, in a first iteration, members of the FDI Think Tank– being experts in oral health, public health and health economics – critically assessed and compared available definitions in order to identify emerging common themes, as well as gaps. Based on this analysis, a new definition of oral health was developed under the guiding principles that oral health does not sit in isolation but is embedded in the wider framework of overall health, that it is multidimensional, and that it is a dynamic construct. In a second iteration, at a two-day workshop of Think Tank members, the theoretical model that had been developed was tested against the values and expectations of a wider range of stakeholders, including patients, oral health professionals, NDAs, the public health community, academia, government, industry and third-party payers. The definition and its companion framework were revised based on feedback obtained. In a subsequent step, an executive summary presenting the draft definition and framework was presented to the FDI Council, FDI Committee Chairs and all NDAs members of FDI for comments and feedback. A total of 38 associations provided an overwhelmingly constructive and supportive feedback. The final wording of the present definition is the result of a careful review of all comments provided.

The way forward

The proposed definition and its companion framework lay a solid basis, which can now be built upon to start measuring oral health in a coherent, valid and comparable way. With our proposed definition and framework having been accepted and adopted by FDI and its constituencies, the second phase of this project must now focus on the development of a standard measurement instrument that can be applied across countries and across settings. In order to achieve this goal, we now aim at bringing together a group of experts to identify and review existing measurement tools, and at using a Delphi process to reach consensus over the most relevant items for each of the dimensions of our definition/framework that should be monitored in a standardized fashion, for each of the dimensions of our definition/framework. Once our standard measurement instrument is finalised, the greatest challenge will lie in ensuring that it is **widely used**.

- **For FDI**, as an umbrella organisation, this may translate into actions that would facilitate dissemination of this measurement toolbox to all its member associations, into providing methodological and technological support for data collection as requested, and into assembling a basic dataset to inform its global advocacy work (DataHub 2.0).
- **From a National Dental Association perspective**, this may translate into a pre-identified network of practitioners – perhaps a sentinel set - who agree to be trained and to collect standardized data over time; or it may translate into the integration of oral health related data within existing country data collection systems, or into a stand-alone survey that is administered with agreed upon frequency or a combination of these attributes

Conclusion

This paper provides a contemporary definition of oral health. This definition resonates with definitions currently used by many NDAs and by the World Health Organization. It is therefore not a revolution, but an evolution. Its companion framework allows for a clarification of all different elements that constitute, shape and influence oral health. This in turn provides a solid basis to develop a set of standard measurements that will have both validity and comparability. It is our hope that this work will be widely shared, disseminated and used in order to become operational. We therefore call upon all NDAs to embrace our proposed definition of oral health, and to advocate for its operationalization in their own settings.

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