

FOR NON-ORAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Raising Awareness of Oral Health and Global Oral Health

Background

Oral health is an integral component of overall health and well-being, but it is often overlooked or neglected in local, national and global health agendas. Global oral health aims for optimal oral health for all people and elimination of global health inequities. These goals are to be achieved through health promotion, disease prevention, and appropriate oral care approaches that consider common determinants and solutions and acknowledge oral health as part of overall health.¹



Oral health

FDI World Dental Federation 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 (head, face, and oral cavity).²

The World Health Organization (WHO) Draft Global Oral Health Action Plan (2023–2030) (GOHAP), Strategic Objective 2 defines oral health promotion and oral disease prevention as follows:

- Enable all people to achieve the best possible oral health and address the social and commercial determinants and risk factors of oral diseases and conditions.³

The GOHAP Strategic Objective 3 relates to workforce development and recommends:

- To develop innovative workforce models and revise and expand competency-based education to respond to population health needs³.

Global oral health promotion

According to the WHO, oral diseases affect around 3.5 billion people worldwide, with untreated dental caries being the most prevalent.⁴ Oral diseases can cause pain, infection, tooth loss, and even contribute to systemic health issues such as diabetes.⁴ However, many countries lack sufficient oral healthcare infrastructure while oral health services are often inaccessible or unaffordable for disadvantaged populations. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, aiming for universal health and well-being, emphasizes leaving no one behind. Prioritizing oral health within this goal ensures equitable access to oral health care for all.

In recent years, many developments in the global oral health agenda have been achieved through the efforts of organizations such as the WHO, FDI and The Lancet:

1. The GOHAP³ places a strong emphasis on the role of primary healthcare providers in promoting oral health and preventing oral diseases. The plan recognizes that primary healthcare providers, including physicians, nurses, and community health workers, are often the first point of contact for patients seeking healthcare, and play a crucial role in delivering oral health services and promoting good oral health practice. The GOHAP also emphasizes the need to integrate oral health into WHO noncommunicable diseases (NCD) and Universal Health Coverage (UHC) agendas, as well as into the UN SDGs.
2. FDI's Vision 2030⁵ is a global initiative that aims to improve oral health and prevent oral diseases through advocacy, education, and partnerships. It includes efforts to promote oral health as a key component of overall health, strengthen dental education and training, and increase access to care for underserved populations.
3. The Lancet Series on Oral Health⁶, published in 2019, highlights the significant burden of oral diseases worldwide and calls for a global response to improve oral health. The series emphasizes the importance of primary healthcare providers in delivering oral health services, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where access to dental care may be limited. The Lancet Series recommends that primary healthcare providers should be trained to deliver basic oral health services, such as fluoride application and dental sealants. The series also emphasizes the importance of integrating oral health services into primary healthcare systems, and of ensuring that oral health is recognized as an integral part of overall health.



Importance of other Healthcare Professionals (HCPs)

Other healthcare professionals (HCPs), including primary care physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and community health workers, play a significant role in global oral health advocacy.⁷ Their direct contact with patients and communities means they are able to raise awareness about oral health and promote prevention and early intervention strategies.⁷ Their involvement can break down barriers to accessing oral healthcare services and contribute to a more integrated approach to healthcare.

HCPs need to understand the prevalence, incidence and impact of oral diseases, risk factors, and the availability of oral healthcare services in their communities. They should also recognize the importance of timely referrals for individuals with oral health issues.

Ways other HCPs can promote oral health

1. Incorporating oral health education into their practice and counselling patients and families on the importance of a healthy diet, lower sugar consumption and oral hygiene routines, such as regular brushing and flossing.
2. Collaborating with oral healthcare professionals to promote oral health screenings and referrals for individuals with oral health issues.
3. Advocating for policies and programmes that support oral health promotion, disease prevention, and access to affordable oral healthcare services.
4. Raising awareness of the impact of oral diseases on overall health and well-being through community outreach and education.
5. Engaging in interprofessional collaboration to promote a more integrated and holistic approach to healthcare, recognizing the importance of oral health.
6. Encouraging the education and engagement of primary care physicians, nurses, and other healthcare providers in areas lacking sufficient dentists and dental teams. Advocating for training initiatives that empower these professionals to deliver basic oral health prevention and interventions within their scope of practice, thereby expanding access to oral healthcare in underserved communities.

How other HCPs can advocate for global oral health

Other healthcare professionals (HCPs), including primary care physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and community health workers, at a policy level, can advocate for policies and programmes that promote oral health and address barriers to accessing oral healthcare services. These steps can include:

1. Advocating for policies that support oral health promotion and disease prevention, such as community-based oral health education programmes, fluoridation of water supplies, sugar taxation and tobacco and alcohol control policies.
2. Supporting national policies that increase access to affordable oral healthcare services, such as expanding public dental insurance coverage and incentivizing the recruitment and retention of oral healthcare providers in underserved areas.
3. Participating in policy advocacy efforts at the subnational, national and international levels to ensure that oral health is included in broader health policies and agendas, such as the integration of oral health into WHO agendas for NCD/UHC agendas, and the UN SDGs.
4. Collaborating with policymakers and stakeholders to promote intersectoral, transdisciplinary approaches to addressing oral health issues, such as integrating oral health into primary healthcare systems and addressing social determinants of oral health.
5. Participating in policy evaluation and research to ensure that policies are evidence-based, effective in promoting oral health and address oral health disparities.
6. Embracing an intersectoral approach: Advocate for a comprehensive perspective that transcends UN SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) to encompass broader social determinants of health. Ensure that oral health is integrated into policy deliberations across all UN 17 SDGs.

This factsheet is supported by:



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Other Resources

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